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ABSTRACT

A case study of three high schools was conducted as the first phase of a 2-year study of comprehensive high schools' vocational course offerings and how they decide which students should be enrolled in them. The schools are similar in size and grade span and in the same labor market area; they belong to different school districts and serve different student populations. One school serves a racially and socioeconomically diverse group in a naturally integrated neighborhood, the second school serves a mostly middle- to upper middle-class White and Asian population, and the third school serves a student population nearly all Black or Hispanic, with a substantial proportion poor. Other differences in the schools included differences in the type and range of vocational programs, number of and expectations for the students who take the courses, organization and management style of the schools, morale of faculty and staff, and local traditions or history. At all three schools, the guidance and placement systems seem to concentrate on college-bound and severely troubled students, almost ignoring noncollege-bound, untroubled students. Although each of the schools offers a variety of vocational courses, none has a cohesive, comprehensive vocational program. At all three schools, the perception of vocational education was of poor teachers, poor equipment, poor students, and poor courses. The study concluded that a radical approach to high school reform that would involve a more fundamental reconstruction of the high school curriculum, blurring the distinction between academic and vocational subjects, should be investigated. (31 references.) (KC)

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M. Selvin, J. Oakes, S. Hare,
K. Ramsey, D. Schoeff

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M. Selvin, J. Oakes, S. Hare,
K. Ramsey, D. Schoeff

The RAND Corporation
Santa Monica, CA

National Center for Research in Vocational Education
University of California, Berkeley
2150 Shattuck Avenue, Suite 600
Berkeley, CA 94704-1306

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PREFACE

This Note documents work conducted during the first year of a two-year investigation of curriculum decisionmaking—particularly with respect to vocational education—in comprehensive high schools. The Note presents case studies of three high schools, undertaken to learn how high school administrators, teachers, counselors, and students characterize the academic and vocational course offerings and the student placement and counseling processes at their schools. It examines how and why schools differ in the range of courses and other vocational opportunities they offer, the process by which students are placed in those courses, and the expectations the staff holds for its students.

The case study data constitute half of the project's curriculum decisionmaking database. The second half of the project will analyze transcripts collected from seniors who graduated in 1988 from each school. The resulting database should show how students actually move through the vocational and academic curricula at each school: Do the descriptions of the course offerings and the placement process reported by the case study respondents appear to be accurate? How are academic and vocational opportunities allocated? What are the outcomes of the course placement and counseling process at each school on the educational achievement of students at those schools, and on the mobility of students with different educational, ethnic, and economic backgrounds? What factors explain the observed differences in course offerings and placement patterns?

Although the case studies alone do not provide a complete picture of the course offerings and placement process at each school, they are being published at this time for two reasons: First, the results of the first phase should be of sufficient interest to inform the work of other educational researchers in this area. Second, the analysis of the transcript data to be presented in the final report of this project will draw heavily on the observations published here.

This study has been conducted under the auspices of the National Center for Research in Vocational Education at the University of California at Berkeley, funded by the U.S. Department of Education.

SUMMARY

RESEARCH APPROACH AND OBJECTIVES

This report presents findings from the first phase of a two-year study of why comprehensive nigh schools offer the vocational courses they do and how they decide which students should be enrolled in them. Case studies of three comprehensive public high schools, describing the processes of curriculum and placement decisionmaking in these schools, reveal the effects of the daily realities of operating a school and the larger educational policy environment in which the schools operate.[1] The three schools are similar in size and grade span and are all located within the same labor-market area; they are also subject to the same state curriculum policies.[2]

The schools differ, however, in two important ways. First, they each belong to a different local school district. Each district develops its own interpretations of state policies and its own curriculum policies. The schools also differ in the student populations they serve. One school, Coolidge High, serves a racially and socioeconomically diverse group in a naturally integrated neighborhood. The students at the second school, Washington High, are almost entirely middle- to upper-middle-class white and Asian. Students at the third school, McKinley High, are nearly all black or Hispanic, and a substantial proportion of them are poor.

The similarities and differences among the schools permit us to develop some preliminary hypotheses about how comprehensive high schools of various types juggle academic and vocational programs. They also permit us to explore the pressures from state and district policymakers, the needs of the surrounding labor market, and perceptions about the types of educational experiences different students need in high school. More specifically, we address the following questions:

- What part does vocational education play in the overall educational goals and strategy of each high school?

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[1]In the second year, we will analyze transcripts collected from seniors in the class of 1988 at each school. Combined with our case study findings, these data should reveal how students actually move through the vocational and academic curricula at each school.

[2]To protect confidentiality, the name and location of each school, as well as the names of all individuals with whom we spoke, have been changed in this Note. All the names assigned are pseudonyms.

- How do students at the three high schools decide which vocational and academic courses to take? How are guidance and placement resources at each school distributed among students with different perceived abilities and interests? How are academic and vocational opportunities distributed among students at each school?
- What does the behavior of administrators, teachers, and students reveal about their attitudes toward and expectations for vocational classes and the students in those classes?
- How well do the quality and accessibility of vocational courses offered at each school match the goals of those schools and districts for vocational education?

To examine these issues, we used a case study methodology. At each of the three schools, we collected and analyzed school record data (student handbooks, course descriptions, master schedules) to obtain the public information about course offerings and enrollment processes. These provided us with a comprehensive and "objective" picture of the opportunities available at the schools and how students went about obtaining them. We relied on interviews to reveal the subtler, more "subjective" story of how schools make decisions. We began by interviewing district-level administrators, then site administrators and counselors, then teachers, and finally, groups of students. We conducted these interviews during the 1988-89 school year.

THREE HIGH SCHOOLS: OVERRIDING SIMILARITIES

We selected the three high schools to represent certain important similarities and differences. As noted above, the student body at each school differs in ethnic and racial mix as well as economic status, and each school is part of a different local school district. Because of these differences, we expected to find differences in the type and range of vocational programs available, the number of and expectations for the students who take those courses, and staff perceptions of the role and quality of those courses. And as our research progressed, we saw other striking differences among these schools—in their organization and style of management, the morale of faculty and staff, and local traditions or history—all of which have shaped the range of course offerings, as well as staff perceptions of the curricula. Despite the differences among our schools, we were struck most by their many overriding similarities, which are discussed below.

"Cracks" in the Guidance and Placement Process

Because of the large number of students assigned to each counselor at all three schools, the activism of parents of college-bound students, and the severe personal and academic problems that many students face, the guidance and placement systems seem to serve least well those untroubled students who are not college-bound. Counselors at each school told us that they are best able to serve the needs of the high-achieving college-bound students assigned to them and the students with the most severe behavioral and academic problems. With workloads that range from a low of 350 students assigned to the "pullout" counselor at Coolidge to a high of 700 students assigned to the freshman counselor at McKinley, it is no surprise that overburdened counselors respond primarily to those with the most severe problems or to those with whom the counseling relationship promises to be most rewarding. And, in fact, counselors at each of the schools candidly admitted that a large group of students—those who are passive, those who are undecided about their post-graduation plans, and those with poor to average academic skills—can and do "fall through the cracks" of the guidance structure. The burden falls largely on the students themselves to come forward—to request a change in their track placement, to seek out career information, and to ask for advice. Yet, these are precisely the students who are least likely to do so. They are also the students who are less likely to gain admission to college and are unlikely to have formulated specific post-graduation occupational plans or acquired the requisite skills to enter the workforce.

The Absence of a Coherent Vocational "Program"

While each of the schools we studied offers a variety of vocational courses, none has—or purports to have—a cohesive, comprehensive vocational "program." Vocational education generally commands very little attention in these schools. The instructional patterns mirror the guidance and placement patterns: College-level instruction and basic-skills remediation, rather than vocational education, are the dominant concerns. As a result, increasing academic graduation requirements and pressure to meet university admissions requirements have squeezed many of the elective slots that could have been filled with vocational courses out of student schedules. The mix of vocational courses that remains at each school is less a function of a deliberate strategy than of several often contradictory influences, including a desire to retain the "traditional" vocational and practical arts (e.g., sewing, cooking, wood shop, auto shop, and metal shop); the relative seniority of individual vocational teachers; the ability of particular courses to attract

students; the school's and the district's ability to raise supplemental funds for vocational courses; and prevailing perceptions of the "needs" of students.

Poor Teachers, Poor Equipment, Poor Students, Poor Courses

Third, at all three schools, we encountered similarly negative perceptions of the role and quality of existing vocational courses, of the faculty who teach them, and of the students who take them. These negative perceptions, combined with the absence of an aggressive counseling system for non-college-bound students, have acted synergistically to drain the little remaining vitality and cohesion from vocational offerings. Constraints imposed at each school by the student placement process, the dominance of the academic program, and the needs of the master schedule reinforce negative perceptions of these courses and the students in them. Several vocational teachers told us that students often "end up" in their courses because counselors have nowhere else to put them. In particular, students who become disruptive or dysfunctional in academic classes are transferred into vocational classes. Add to this the fact that many vocational teachers are reluctant to fail students who regularly attend class, and it is hardly surprising that a cyclical pattern of low teacher expectations, low student achievement, and pervasive demoralization has become established.

A NEW APPROACH TO VOCATIONAL REFORM

Despite the preliminary nature of this analysis, the findings do shed some light on the current debate over the future of secondary vocational education.

We discovered that this debate is not taking place in a recognizable form at McKinley, Washington, or Coolidge. Yet the discovery that no discussion of the most constructive mix of academic and vocational courses is taking place at these schools, that there is no deliberate educational strategy for students with a range of academic abilities and aspirations, and that faculty and staff hold such consistently negative perceptions of existing vocational courses, teachers, and students provides some insight into some of the most commonly discussed configurations for incorporating vocational skills into the high school curriculum. Vocational and practical arts instruction has historically been regarded as an integral component of the "comprehensive" high school curriculum. Some of the most popular reform recommendations—e.g., those that argue for infusing traditional vocational programs with instruction in basic skills—are consistent with this view. Yet the recent history at Coolidge, Washington, and McKinley strongly suggests that if vocational education remains within the context of the comprehensive high school

curriculum, it will continue to wither away. It is also unlikely that reforming the content of current vocational offerings would help prepare the students at the three schools for productive work.

The regional occupational programs (ROP) to which each of the case study schools are attached constitute an alternative form of vocational education, supplementing the comprehensive high school curricula. However, ROP classes are often offered outside of normal high school class hours and usually require students to travel long distances from their homes or campuses. As a result, to take advantage of these courses, students must make a commitment to their education above and beyond what they are already making. Given mounting academic requirements for graduation, this kind of commitment may be unrealistic for many students.

Some have argued that a separate vocational high school for non-college-bound students may be a more appropriate alternative than trying to revitalize the comprehensive curriculum. Yet teachers and administrators, particularly at Washington and Coolidge (and to a lesser degree at all-minority McKinley), readily judge the abilities, curriculum "needs," and post-graduation aspirations of students by the students' racial and ethnic backgrounds. We repeatedly heard staff express low expectations for minority students, many of whom were enrolled in lower-track courses. Establishment of a separate vocational high school raises the very real possibility that such a school would be perceived as being largely for non-white, non-college-bound students. And its establishment would bring into stark contrast issues of educational equity that are at present only tacitly acknowledged in comprehensive high schools.

All this suggests that a more radical approach to high school reform is worth further investigation. That approach would involve a more fundamental reconstruction of the high school curriculum, blurring the distinction between "academic" and "vocational" subjects.

The case study schools provided us with no evidence that such reforms would be easily accepted or implemented. However, given current pressures toward academics and the negative attitudes about vocational courses (and the students in them), such reforms may actually face fewer obstacles than the more familiar proposals that are usually discussed. Our experiences in the three high schools suggest that this more radical alternative deserves serious consideration in the debate about whether and how to reform secondary school vocational education.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The research reported in this Note would have been impossible to conduct without the cooperation of school and district officials at the three schools we visited. While we cannot name those many individuals who participated in our interviews—district administrators, principals, deans, vice principals, counselors, teachers, office staff, and students—these people graciously shared with us their observations on the placement process and the academic and vocational curriculum at their schools as well as on the larger issues in which we are interested. Our RAND colleague, Paul Hill, reviewed an earlier draft of this Note and made many helpful suggestions. Finally, Carol Llewellyn and Donna White provided excellent word processing support.

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I. INTRODUCTION

This Note reports on the first phase of a two-year investigation of vocational curricula selection in comprehensive high schools and the process by which the schools decide which students should be enrolled in these curricula. The study examines the day-to-day dynamics of schools' decisions and the ways state, district, and local school conditions affect those decisions. To portray the decisionmaking processes of those schools as fully as possible, the final study report will include (1) case studies from three comprehensive high schools, (2) analyses of the transcripts of the seniors who attended these schools in 1987-88, and (3) comparisons of the course offerings and coursetaking patterns in other, similar schools. The findings should provide insights into how and why the vocational and academic opportunities differ among schools, and how and why various educational opportunities are distributed to different students. These descriptions should help educators and policymakers understand how curriculum decisions may interfere with students' access to appropriate and constructive vocational and academic preparation. These findings may also reveal how schools' decisions limit the opportunities available to poor, minority, and immigrant students.

The Note presents case studies of three comprehensive public high schools which describe how curriculum and placement decisions take place in these schools. They also reveal how the daily realities of operating a school and the larger educational policy environment in which the schools operate affect these decisions.[1] The three schools are similar in size and grade span, and they are all located within the same labor-market area. Students who leave these schools and do not go on to colleges and universities thus have the same post-high-school occupational training and employment opportunities. The schools are also subject to the same state curriculum policies.

The schools differ in two important ways: First, they belong to three different local school districts, each of which develops its own interpretations of state policies and its own curriculum policies. The schools also differ in the student populations they serve. One school, Coolidge High,[2] serves a racially and socioeconomically diverse group of

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[1]During the second year of this project, we will analyze transcripts we collected from seniors in the class of 1988 from each school. The data from the two phases of the study should reveal how students actually move through the vocational and academic curricula at each school.

[2]The identity and location of the schools and the names of the individuals with whom we spoke have been kept confidential. The names by which we refer to the three schools are pseudonyms.

students who live in a naturally integrated neighborhood. The student body at the second school, Washington High, is almost entirely middle- to upper-middle-class white and Asian. Students at the third school, McKinley High, are nearly all black and Hispanic, and a substantial proportion of them are poor.

The similarities and differences among the schools permit us to raise some preliminary hypotheses about how different types of schools juggle academic and vocational programs. They also permit us to explore the pressures from state and district policymakers, the needs of the surrounding labor market, and perceptions about the types of educational experiences different students need in high school. We shall address the following questions:

- What part does vocational education play in the overall educational goals and strategy of each high school?
- How do students at the three schools decide which vocational and academic courses to take? How are guidance and placement resources at each school distributed among students with different perceived abilities and interests? How are academic and vocational opportunities distributed among students at each school?
- What does the behavior of administrators, teachers, and students reveal about their attitudes toward and expectations for vocational classes and the students in those classes?
- How well do the vocational courses offered at each school match the goals of those schools and districts in terms of the quality and accessibility of courses?

The remainder of this section places the study in its larger policy context and reviews the contributions of prior research to our understanding of curriculum decisions. It also outlines the methodology used in the case studies and briefly describes the three schools. Sections II, III, and IV present the case-study data from the three schools. Finally, Section V suggests what can be learned from the case studies about the curriculum decisions high schools make and how these decisions affect the role and function of high school vocational education. It also suggests hypotheses about the probable future constraints on efforts to reform secondary vocational education.

THE DILEMMA OF SECONDARY VOCATIONAL EDUCATION: A NATIONAL POLICY PROBLEM

The vocational education community is currently at the center of a national policy debate focusing on the changing nature of work and whether today's schools will be able to provide the future workforce with the knowledge and skills they will need. Many analysts predict that increasing numbers of both high- and low-level occupations will require employees with strong reading skills, some knowledge of science and technology, and good general problem-solving skills (e.g., Johnston, 1986). Secondary school vocational programs have come under fire both from the U.S. Department of Education (Bennett, 1988; Finn, 1987) and other analysts (e.g., Kearns and Doyle, 1988), and employers increasingly report that traditional school programs are not providing students with the competencies needed in the workplace (National Academy of Sciences, 1984; Committee for Economic Development, 1985). In short, secondary vocational education is being attacked from all sides as being inadequate and largely irrelevant to the workforce needs of a rapidly changing information- and technology-based society.

Several factors make the debate particularly tumultuous. First, policy discussions nearly always draw tight connections between the preparation of the future workforce and the nation's economic productivity and competitiveness. Since the nation's economic standing is frequently assessed as being in some jeopardy, the preparation of future workers has become far more than a technical matter of aligning vocational education and training with likely future workplace needs.

Second, national demographic changes have raised additional questions about whether schools will be able to meet the education and training challenge. Demographers predict that the traditional pool of young people from which entry-level workers have been drawn will shrink substantially over the next few years. Declines in the birthrate after 1964 have already brought overall decreases in the number of 18- to 24-year-olds—the sector of the population containing most of the new entrants to the workforce. This group is expected to decline by 23 percent by 1995 (Johnson, 1987). The *composition* of this group is also changing, since the white birthrate has declined more dramatically than that of other ethnic groups (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1984). In addition, recent immigration has brought greater proportions of newcomers than ever before from less-developed nations in Latin America and Asia. Consequently, analysts forecast an increase of from 20 percent to 27 percent in the number of minorities in the 18- to 24-year-old group by 1998. Dramatic increases in women's labor-market participation also contribute to the changing workforce. These trends have led the the Department of Labor

to estimate that 80 percent of the new additions to the labor force between 1987 and 2000 will be women, minorities, and immigrants (Johnson, 1987).

These projected demographic changes have fueled the debate, since U.S. schools serve minorities and Hispanic immigrants least well. Large proportions of these students, in fact, drop out before finishing high school. Given the shrinkage of the youth population as a whole, schools cannot afford to let a sizable portion of the future workforce drop out underprepared for work or post-secondary education or training.

Finally, existing vocational programs have had difficulty demonstrating that they increase students' access to or successful participation in the labor market. Graduates who have concentrated in vocational subjects seem no more likely to become employed than their nonvocational peers (Mertens, McElwain, Garcia, and Whitmore, 1980; National Institute of Education, 1981; Psacharopoulos, 1987). Moreover, a recent study of California graduates who concentrated in vocational subjects found that their success in gaining employment was no greater than that of high school dropouts (Stern et al., 1986). As a result, vocational educators have been unable to marshal much support for continuing business as usual.

One very salient issue, therefore, is whether and how vocational educators and vocational education policymakers can reform secondary vocational education in ways that address the technical and political problems of preparing the future workforce. The staunchest critics of the status quo advocate replacing high school vocational programs entirely with coursework that provides more and better preparation in basic academic subjects (e.g.,Bennett, 1988; Kearns and Doyle, 1988). These critics view solid academic preparation as the most effective way to provide the necessary literacy and problem-solving skills needed by the future workforce. Other, only slightly less radical proposals include the integration of academic and vocational content and learning activities into restructured high school programs (The William T. Grant Foundation Commission on Work, Family, and Citizenship, 1988). More moderate reforms include the development and implementation of "applied" academic courses as a part of the vocational offerings within comprehensive high schools (e.g., the Principles of Technology course of the Agency for Instructional Technology (AIT)) or at specialized, vocationally oriented high schools (e.g., California's Peninsula Academies). Perhaps the most modest reform proposals call for greater emphasis on basic academic skills in existing vocational programs (e.g., the current efforts of the Southern Regional Education Board; see also Wirt, 1989).

Educational leaders and policymakers are now actively considering the tradeoffs of these various reform strategies. However, the discussions often fail to consider the day-to-day realities of the very high schools reformers seek to change. Yet reform cannot occur unless decisionmakers understand how high schools work and how those who run them think about curriculum and students. Views about such matters as the relative importance of the academic and vocational curriculum and the needs and abilities of the students they serve influence the way educators construct school programs. Understanding these realities can help policymakers decide which reforms hold the greatest promise for generating positive results from secondary vocational education. Additionally, such information should help decisionmakers develop strategies for implementing the reforms that seem most promising. Not the least of the high school realities policymakers and educational leaders need to understand are the processes by which schools decide what academic and vocational programs to offer and which students to enroll in them.

VOCATIONAL CURRICULUM DECISIONS IN HIGH SCHOOLS: WHAT WE ALREADY KNOW

Prior research provides considerable information about how various curricular opportunities are distributed both between and within schools. This work also tells a great deal about which types of students follow various curricular paths. We know, for example, that schools' efforts to provide separate academic and vocational programs stem from a nearly century-old belief that a variety of educational programs are needed to accommodate individual differences among students, prepare young people for the jobs or further education which best suit them, and integrate students into the workforce (Grubb and Lazerson 1974; Kantor, 1986).

We also know that across the nation, students' current access to and participation in vocational and academic educational opportunities differ considerably (NCES, 1985). Some schools focus on academic preparation, offering only a smattering of vocational courses; others are heavily vocational. Some schools' vocational offerings emphasize agriculture; others focus on business; others stress industry and trade-related skills. Within schools, students' access to and participation in vocational and academic courses also differ, as schools track students or students select different paths through the curriculum (NCES, 1985; Oakes, 1985; Ekstrom, Goertz, and Rock, 1988).

Some of these differences are remnants of historic patterns that emphasized vocational training for poor and minority youth and academic preparation for more

affluent whites (Grubb and Lazerson,1974; Kantor, 1986; Oakes, 1985). Recent evidence suggests that between-school differences in vocational and academic offerings may relate less to needs in the immediate labor market than to the social and economic characteristics of students and their neighborhoods. For example, data from Goodlad's national study of schooling suggest that vocational course offerings vary with the racial and socioeconomic characteristics of schools' student populations (Goodlad, 1984; Oakes, 1983). Analyses conducted for the National Assessment of Vocational Education (NAVE) reinforce these findings. These analyses have found that the vocational education available to students in poor schools is of significantly lower quality than that available to students in more affluent communities. The poor schools offer less than half the number of vocational courses and less than half the advanced vocational courses offered by other schools. Moreover, students in poor schools are less likely to have access to an area vocational center (Wirt, 1989). In a similar vein, High School and Beyond (HSB) data suggest that fewer advanced courses in mathematics are offered in high schools in disadvantaged urban areas (NCES, 1985a).

Across all schools, about 38 percent of the 1982 seniors identified themselves as enrolled in academic programs, 35 percent in general curricula, and 27 percent in vocational curricula (Ekstrom, Goertz, and Rock, 1988). Within schools, low-income students showed higher participation rates in vocational programs, and affluent and white students showed greater participation in academic programs (NCES, 1985b). For example, 48 percent of the white 1982 HSB seniors reported being in academic programs, compared with 32 percent of the blacks and 23 percent of Mexican-Americans (Ekstrom, Goertz, and Rock, 1988).

These findings become more complicated when we look at evidence from student transcripts. The boundaries among curricular tracks may be fuzzier than student reports suggest. Moreover, students are not always accurate in their perceptions of the curricular paths they are following. For example, the transcripts of the 1982 HSB seniors show that the average student in the academic track took slightly more than 3 semesters of vocational courses. Except for Asian-Americans, students from different racial and ethnic backgrounds actually took almost the same numbers of semesters of vocational courses: Asian-American students took an average of 3.22 semesters of vocational education; whites, 5.5; blacks, 5.82, and Mexican-Americans, 6.12 (Ekstrom, Goertz, and Rock, 1988). Recent NAVE transcript analyses found that 97 percent of all high school students enroll in some vocational education, and almost half of the vocational education credits are earned by college-bound students (Hoachlander, Brown, and Tuma, 1987).

Far more dramatic than racial differences in vocational course participation are differences in the types of academic classes various students take. Poor and minority students are consistently overrepresented in low-level and remedial academic courses. The differences in academic coursetaking patterns may result from assumptions by counselors and teachers about which students are work-bound and which are college-bound. These differences also appear to play a greater role in *determining* which students are work- or college-bound (Oakes, 1987).

Some case study data suggest that, within vocational programs, poor and minority students are also disproportionately enrolled in courses that prepare them for low-level jobs (Oakes, 1983). These findings are somewhat reinforced by national data showing that more black students than whites enroll in courses that teach students specific skills for jobs in occupational home economics, health occupations, and construction. And more affluent students take a relatively smaller percentage of occupationally specific courses and a somewhat larger percentage of classes providing more general employability skills such as typing and introductory courses in industrial arts (Hoachlander, Brown, and Tuma, 1987).

We know that past performance, test scores, and teacher recommendations play a part in course placement decisions, as does student choice (Kirst,1984; Oakes, 1985). Only about a third of the HSB seniors (including students who took highly academic programs and those who identified themselves as vocational students) reported that the school assigned them to their programs. However, more minority students than whites reported that the school assigned them to their programs (52 percent vs. 42 percent). Despite their more frequent perception of being assigned to programs, fewer minorities than whites reported that they received assistance from guidance counselors about what classes to take (20 percent of blacks, 16 percent of Mexican-Americans, and 23 percent of whites; see Ekstrom, Goertz, and Rock, 1988). Some earlier work suggests, however, that coursetaking advice may not be particularly helpful to minorities. Guidance counselors' recommendations may not always be based on educationally relevant criteria; sometimes their advice appears to be influenced by factors related to race and class, such as dress and speech patterns. Under these conditions, poor and minority students may be more likely to be placed in lower-level classes (Cicourel and Kitsuse, 1963).

Although we know of these patterns and their historic roots, we know little about current policies and practices that produce them or about the actual decisionmaking processes that shape the vocational and academic curricula at high schools. Similarly, we know little about the processes of enrolling students in vocational and academic programs

and even less about the tangible and intangible factors that influence these processes. We suspect, however, that decisions about what curriculum to offer and which students to enroll in various courses are very dynamic and complex. For example, the standardized definitions of "academic," "vocational," and "general" track offerings and placements typically used in large-scale data collection efforts are undoubtedly tidier than what is found in students' transcripts (Hoachlander, Brown, and Tuma, 1987). In fact, in some states, declines in student enrollment and increased academic requirements have virtually eliminated a "vocational track." In many schools, including the three we visited, what remains is a smattering of vocational class electives (e.g., Kirst, 1984).

We also know that the logistics of creating a schedule each year probably wreak havoc with efforts to offer a well-developed vocational program and frustrate efforts to have students follow a well-defined sequence (or track) of courses across subject fields (Garet and DeLaney, 1988). Limitations in schools' teaching staffs and other available resources similarly constrain vocational offerings. Students' enrollment decisions—even when they do include choice—are undoubtedly far more constrained than is implied by the widely held belief that schools offer a wide range of offerings and that students and their parents simply choose the programs that best meet their needs. The case studies reported here should shed some light on these little-understood complexities and their profound effects on student coursetaking.

THE SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY OF THE CASE STUDIES

We began this study with a review of the literature on secondary vocational education and tracking. This review provided a conceptual framework for selecting schools and designing data collection and analysis strategies. The literature revealed several issues that warranted further investigation. Particularly important were the schools' perceptions of student needs and post-secondary destinations (especially as they relate to race and social class), students' choices, and the curricular limits and opportunities resulting from the human and material resources available to schools. We then selected districts and schools that met our sampling criteria and agreed to provide detailed data about vocational offerings and enrollments.

We obtained the public information about course offerings and enrollment processes from school records (student handbooks, course descriptions, master schedules). This provided us with a comprehensive and "objective" picture of the opportunities available at the three schools and the ways students went about obtaining them.

We relied on interviews to reveal the subtler, more "subjective" view of how schools make decisions. We conducted these interviews during the 1988-89 school year, beginning with interviews of district-level administrators, then interviewing site administrators and counselors, then teachers, and finally, groups of students. We designed our interview protocols for each respondent group as we proceeded, in order to incorporate knowledge gained in the previous tier of interviews. Nevertheless, in each interview, we queried respondents about the influence on school decisions of several factors external to the school, including funding levels and policies at the state and local level and demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of student populations. We also asked about the effects of internal school factors—including the philosophy of the school administration, the capacity and teaching preferences of the staff, and the logistics of building a schedule. Drawing on the tracking literature, we also framed questions that might elicit educators' perceptions of the "appropriate" curricula for various students (e.g., those with particular race, class, gender, and prior achievement characteristics), guidance counseling practices, grades, and test scores. We also asked about students' and their parents' preferences as determinants of the availability of particular programs and the allocation of students to these programs.

At each school, we interviewed the district curriculum director, the district vocational education coordinator, the school principal, and assistant principals or deans responsible for overseeing curriculum or counseling. We also interviewed all of the counselors and approximately 15 teachers at each school. Finally, we interviewed several groups of students at Coolidge and Washington drawn from both vocational classes and academic classes in various tracks.[3] Our interview questions focused on factors that influence students' decisions to enroll in particular courses, their parents' involvement in those decisions, their current interests, their perceptions of their abilities, their post-secondary aspirations, and the schools' guidance counseling processes.

To ensure the validity of our interview data, we used standard triangulation procedures. We collected data about each topic of interest from a variety of data sources (school records, interviews, and observations). Additionally, several data collectors conducted interviews and observations at each site.[4]

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[3]When we attempted to schedule student interviews at McKinley High, the principal decided that he did not wish to participate in that phase of the research as he felt that the project had already taken too much of his staff's time.

[4]Despite these efforts, and because of the chaotic atmosphere at McKinley High (see Section IV), the interview data we collected there are not as complete as those from Coolidge and Washington.

We also used triangulation strategies to analyze the case study data. At least two members of the study team coded data from interviews and site visits and sorted them into categories or themes central to the study. Teams of researchers coded the school record data to generate baseline quantitative descriptions of the curriculum at each school and policies regarding student placement. We then used these data to develop individual case studies of the three schools that appear in the next three sections of this Note.

THE SCHOOLS AND THEIR CONTEXT

The geographic proximity of the three four-year senior high schools in this study held constant both the labor market for which vocational education programs may be preparing their students and the post-secondary education and training opportunities available to graduates and dropouts. The schools also have similar access to a state-supported regional occupational training program. This program provides courses both on high school campuses and in off-campus centers. These courses differ in several important respects from the "regular" school vocational offerings. Their programs are subject to state approval, their staffs are more closely connected with work settings (many are part-time employees), and the state provides these programs with extra funding to purchase up-to-date equipment and materials. All of these factors are likely to influence the quantity and type of vocational courses the schools offer within their comprehensive program.

Our three schools vary, however, on other dimensions (e.g., district curriculum policies, type of student population, etc.) that are potentially related to their offerings and enrollment patterns. As noted earlier, one school is racially and socioeconomically diverse because of its naturally integrated neighborhood; one is almost entirely middle- to upper-middle-class white and Asian; and students at a third school are nearly all black and Hispanic, a substantial proportion of them poor. Given what we know from the literature, these differences probably relate to the decisions schools make.

In the following sections, we describe in more detail the community each school serves, the schools' organizational context, their professed educational missions, and the views of the faculties about the students and what they are likely to gain from the schools. We also describe how each school ranks on several standard measures of performance—students' academic achievement, college acceptance, and attrition. We then investigate in detail the courses each school offers, the tracks or ability-grouped classes that exist, and the processes each school uses to decide which students should take various programs of study. We also relate the opinions of many staff and students about the quality and

appropriateness of the programs. We also explain what we found to be important influences on these curricular dimensions and what, if any, changes might be likely in the future.

As the case studies unfold, the reader will quickly recognize that vocational education commands very little of our attention. Neither our descriptions of the curriculum and coursetaking decisions, nor our summaries of the curricular issues that are salient to the staffs or the students focus primarily on vocational education. Rather, academic concerns dominate each of our cases. This was not our intent at the outset of the study. To the contrary, we scrutinized each piece of printed material and approached each interview with an eye to uncovering as much as we could about the schools' vocational programs and the students who participate in them. Simply put, there was little to be found.

Vocational education is nearly invisible in each of the three, quite different high schools we examined: Few vocational courses are offered on campus, and few students take advantage of specialized area vocational programs available to them. Consequently, issues about vocational education simply don't loom large in the minds of those who work in our schools. Perhaps even more striking (and distressing) than the lack of visibility of vocational education are the negative perceptions that so many have about it.

The absence of a strong or positive vocational presence at any of our schools is undoubtedly the most important finding of our work to date. And we suspect that this finding holds the most powerful implications for the reform of secondary vocational education.

II. COOLIDGE HIGH SCHOOL: WRESTLING WITH PERCEIVED DECLINE

COOLIDGE AND ITS COMMUNITY

Coolidge High School was founded and built in 1957 to serve families who settled in the area's newly-built housing. During the 1950s, 1960s, and early 1970s, the city—and the high school—attracted primarily upper- and upper-middle-income families who sought employment in nearby business and industry.

Coolidge High and its community have undergone tremendous demographic change since the school's founding. Fifteen years ago, Coolidge was a virtually all-white school, drawing students from relatively affluent Jewish families and a small group of middle-class, highly motivated and involved Nisei (second-generation Japanese-American) families. The first black student, the child of a staff member, entered Coolidge in 1971. The school now draws students from many Hispanic immigrant and second-generation families; the student body also includes many blacks, relatively fewer Anglos, and an increasing number of Asian immigrants. At present, the Coolidge student body is about 44 percent Anglo, 30 percent Hispanic, 14 percent black, and 12 percent Asian. Data from the 1987-88 state high school assessment report show that about 5 percent of Coolidge's students qualify for Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). Just under 17 percent are classified as being limited-English-proficient (LEP).

Currently, about 1,500 students attend Coolidge High, down from 1,700 during the 1987-88 school year. As has happened in many other area high schools, enrollment has gradually declined,[1] while the ethnic and racial makeup of the student body has dramatically changed.[2]

The extent and nature of parent and community involvement in Coolidge High has also fluctuated considerably over the school's lifetime. Teachers and administrators characterize parents as having been deeply involved in school and board of education issues during the early decades. As the student body has become more diverse, however, and particularly with the influx of non-English-speaking Hispanic and Asian immigrant families, parental involvement has declined. The principal and administrators report that involvement has "started to come back" in recent years, however.

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[1]In 1986, for example there were 1,867 students at Coolidge.

[2]Seven years ago, only 15 percent of Coolidge students were Hispanic; today, Hispanics constitute about 30 percent of the student body.

Administrators and faculty repeatedly told us that the parents of Coolidge's college-bound students have been and still are the most vocal and active. An advisory committee of parents, students, and teachers helps administer the school improvement program that provides Coolidge with $100,000 annually from the state. The PTA is strong, but small in number; among other services, it has provided scholarships and sponsored assemblies at which individuals from different career areas address the students.

The local business community is also involved in a number of ways at Coolidge. The school office is decorated with plaques representing scholarships and awards sponsored by many local businesses. Most significant, however, is the new technology center now being constructed on campus under the sponsorship of a consortium of major industrial firms in the area.

COOLIDGE AS AN ORGANIZATION

Educational District, Board, and School: Close Connections

Coolidge is the only comprehensive high school in its district. There is a continuation school attached to Coolidge, which the principal regards as a last-ditch effort to keep its approximately 100 potential dropouts in school. The continuation school is particularly geared to students who need to work to help support their families. In addition to the high schools, there are four elementary schools and one middle school in the district.

Because the district is small, its governance and administration are relatively unbureaucratic and often informal. For example, the assistant superintendent for educational services recommends changes in the district's curriculum to the board of education. The principal, a white male in his fifties who has been at Coolidge for the past seven years and in the district for 15 years, along with the assistant principal for curriculum, provides input about proposed changes and also monitors implemented changes. These administrators know each other and the board well, and much of the communication is informal. Control of the vocational curriculum is informally shared by the director of the adult school and vocational education, the school principal, and the regional occupational program (ROP) coordinator (who is also the dean of guidance). Generally, throughout the district administration, there seems to be friendly collaboration in the interest of getting the job done; administrators voluntarily fill in gaps left by others' inaction—at both the district and the school level.

The small size of the district also seems to encourage school board involvement in the day-to-day workings of the school. The principal describes the local board of education as "very close to the community," noting that parents often go directly to the board with a complaint about a teacher or the school, rather than to him. He views this both positively and negatively. On the one hand, he says, a principal in a big district is far more autonomous than he feels at Coolidge. On the other hand, when faced with a parent complaint about a teacher or some other aspect of the school with which he agrees, he feels that the support he gets from the board helps to resolve problems much more quickly than he would be able to if he had to move from the bottom up.

COOLIDGE AS AN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION

The Principal: Matching Mission and Organization

Coolidge's principal compared his problems at Coolidge with those of Lee Iacocca upon taking charge of Chrysler: Iacocca saw that Chrysler had branched off in too many areas and needed to redefine its primary mission as manufacturing cars. Similarly, the principal said that Coolidge's mission is teaching basic skills and social development, keeping students in school, and making them into productive citizens who vote and understand the political process, have an appreciation of the arts, and can plan for a future in which they will need to learn how to get and hold a job—or perhaps several jobs in different fields during their working life.

To more tightly focus the school's mission for the 1988-89 school year, the principal took the "effective schools" approach to school climate and instruction. This approach includes reevaluating the curriculum, encouraging staff development consistent with this reevaluation, and establishing and maintaining clear goals and high academic expectations for students and teachers. These goals grew out of a two-year-long dialogue that included district and school officials as well as parents.

To create a structure that is consistent with these goals, the principal instituted a major reorganization of his top-level administrative staff. Maintaining discipline is viewed as an increasingly large job at Coolidge—too large, the principal decided, for one assistant principal to handle. Consequently, he has adopted a new team approach, replacing two of three assistant principals with three deans of student services (activities and athletics, guidance, and budget and security). These deans, along with Coolidge's four counselors, are jointly responsible for discipline. There is now only one assistant principal; she and the principal are the only administrators *without* responsibility for

discipline. She is responsible for curriculum development, for evaluating and assisting teachers with instruction, and for conducting classroom visitations.

Coolidge hired its dean of guidance for the 1988-89 school year from outside the district. The administration has strong expectations for this new dean, hoping that he will make changes and bring a new energy and ideas to the school, particularly with respect to the difficult issues of defining an "appropriate" curriculum for Coolidge students. His responsibilities include administration of the guidance, placement, and student scheduling functions, as well as coordination of the ROP.

The Staff: A Less Optimistic View

Many on Coolidge's largely white staff have spent all or most of their careers at the school, but this cohort is now beginning to retire. Last year, five or six of the school's 76 teachers retired, and more retirements are expected within the next few years. The principal has made an effort to hire black and Hispanic teachers to fill these vacancies; he has hired three black teachers in recent years, but said he is having trouble finding qualified Hispanic applicants.

The morale of the Coolidge staff and their attitudes toward the principal are mixed.[3] Generally speaking, attitudes vary by length of tenure at the school. Many of the older staff have strong ties to Coolidge, yet they lament what they perceive as an appreciable decline in the quality of education and the caliber of the students at the school since the 1960s and 1970s. They talked to us about the lack of parent involvement and the rising incidence of drug and gang problems, as well as the increasing numbers of students with major personal problems at home. The older teachers, as well as some of those who joined Coolidge more recently, expressed frustration with the principal for his failure to involve them meaningfully in decisions that pertain to them, on issues such as curriculum, discipline, attendance policies, and the master schedule. Like the administrators, the teachers have high expectations for the new dean. They hope that he will be an ally—that he will make meaningful efforts to include them in school decisionmaking. However, they are generally saddened and frustrated by the decline in

[3]There is a widespread consensus among the counselors, teachers, and even the district officials with whom we spoke that the principal is rather indecisive and, consequently, not a strong leader. At the same time, however, he is viewed as autocratic. For example, the counselors opposed the principal's administrative reorganization because they view themselves exclusively as student advocates and did not want to assume responsibility for discipline in addition to their other duties. Nonetheless, he went to the school board over this issue last spring and won. In our interview, one counselor expressed his frustration with the principal's actions in this regard, saying, "They mandate and we do."

funding in recent years that has forced the closing of classes and other educational and extracurricular opportunities on campus.

How Coolidge Views Its Students: Declining Achievement and Motivation

Coolidge's faculty and staff are divided in their view of the changing student body. Some teachers and staff see the increasing ethnic diversity as positive—providing a "marvelous natural mix" that larger urban districts have to spend huge sums on busing to achieve. Others are less positive about the school's increasing pluralism, pointing to what they perceive as a corresponding decline in student achievement and motivation. Several of the more senior faculty and staff almost wistfully remember Coolidge's first decades, when the school was widely perceived to be among the top few high schools in the greater metropolitan area.

Today, most would describe Coolidge as "average." In the state testing program that provides annual information about the academic achievement of public school students, 1988 Coolidge seniors scored in the 48th percentile in math and the 55th percentile in reading. Test scores have remained at about this same level over the past four years.

The principal estimates that approximately 25 percent of Coolidge's students go directly to a four-year college after graduation. Another 50 percent enter a junior college or get additional training after high school. However, state data indicate that a total of only 49 percent actually entered public universities, colleges, and community colleges in the state. These figures suggest that, unless a quarter of the students are going out of state or to private schools, these school estimates are inflated. Perhaps most striking, only 6 percent of the class of 1986 actually entered the more elite state university system, and only 11 percent enrolled in the less selective state universities. Nearly 50 percent of the seniors in the class of 1987 took the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), an increase over recent years. They ranked in the 35th percentile for the state on the mean SAT verbal score, and in the 44th percentile on the mean math score.

These data on academic performance and college enrollments must be viewed in the context of Coolidge's attrition rate, which, according to the principal, is roughly 25 percent between the ninth and twelfth grades. (However, the yearly dropout rate that the school reports to the state is between 2 and 3 percent.) Moreover, the principal's estimate of 25 percent attrition suggests that the school's overall rate of entry into the state's

public colleges and universities is more accurately 36 percent, if we also consider those students who have left the school.[4]

However, those who do attend four-year colleges and universities in the state do fairly well. The 23 Coolidge students from the senior class of 1986 who completed their freshman year at the top state universities had a grade point average of 3.02; the 41 students completing their first year at the other state universities achieved an average of 2.55.

The perceived decline in student ability has also generated much discussion about the "appropriate" curriculum or range of curricula—vocational and academic—for students at this school. The attitudes of faculty and administrators toward Coolidge students—their expectations of and for the students, their sense of student needs, and the role of the school in meeting those needs—oscillate around a set of core beliefs. First, there is a widespread view that once a student gets to high school, his or her educational prospects are set. The general view is that a student who is not motivated or not able cannot be changed. The principal, for example, told us that kindergarten teachers can accurately identify those children who will be "at-risk" at high school, conveying his own sense that the high school is largely powerless to interrupt predictable patterns. We found that the principal's views were almost universally held among faculty and staff. We asked many of our respondents to give us an example of a student "who comes to this school with low-level skills and makes fairly dramatic improvements—for example, moves from general to college-prep classes." Of 20 teachers we interviewed, only six could give us such an example. One teacher, who had a long tenure at Coolidge, said he recalled one student "probably 25 years ago." Another teacher admitted that this sort of improvement "is rare; . . . real problem kids are neglected here, . . . hidden in slow classes. The good students are taken care of."

Second, these assumptions about students' abilities and their likely future occupations and achievement break down fairly consistently by race and ethnicity. We repeatedly heard about the extraordinary motivation and abilities of Asian students at Coolidge. Faculty and staff assume that most of these students will attend four-year colleges and universities. By contrast, there is a widely held belief that many of the Hispanic students at Coolidge have poor basic skills, poor motivation, and limited future expectations. One administrator told us that Hispanic families are generally not

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[4]Similarly, when adjusted for attrition, only 4 percent of the class attended the top state university campuses; 8 percent, the less prestigious state universities; and 23 percent, community colleges.

encouraging their children to attend college, but rather want them to acquire marketable skills. As evidence, this administrator pointed to the "huge" demand among "Mexican girls" on campus for the cosmetology course offered through the local ROP. Similar views, although to a lesser extent, were also expressed concerning black students at Coolidge. Many of our respondents placed a large proportion of the Anglo contingent somewhere near the middle in terms of academic skills and near the bottom in terms of motivation. Even though whites dominate the "high-level" classes at the school, the principal characterized many of these students as having "tremendous apathy"; they "don't give a damn"; they "are smart but were spoiled and never had to apply themselves." Teachers try to motivate these students, get no response, blame themselves for poor teaching, and "burn out."

Third, we detected a great deal of ambivalence among faculty and staff in their views of students—one counselor told us, "I don't like the words coming into my head"—and some discomfort about the consequences of "typing" students in this way. The principal, for example, expressed surprise at the extent to which parents of "D and F students" insist that their children should be taking college-preparatory courses. Yet, he generally assents to parent wishes, even if he believes that the students will flounder in these courses, admitting he has "been proven wrong many times." More important, he says that he doesn't want to discourage a child who aspires to college; he doesn't "want to miss any kids." On the other hand, we heard from several at Coolidge about the prejudicial attitudes of some older white teachers at Coolidge toward minority students. One respondent told us, "I am amazed and appalled by what I see as almost racist remarks" by some teachers.

As discussed below, these assumptions regarding student abilities, aspirations, and the function of the school exert a powerful influence on the range and quality of courses offered at Coolidge and the process by which students are placed into those courses.

THE OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURE: THE CURRICULUM

In the following, we shall draw the outlines of Coolidge's curriculum: the academic and vocational courses offered on and off campus, the requirements that determine graduation, and the tracking or grouping system used at Coolidge.

On-Campus Course Offerings: The Dominance of Academics

The student course-description handbook, distributed to students, lists all courses approved and taught at Coolidge High. The English and social studies departments, with

the stiffest graduation requirements in the school, offer the most courses at Coolidge; social studies offers fewer electives than English. The choices in science and math are much more limited. The course listings in fine arts, foreign languages, and the vocational departments are diverse and lengthy, but in reality the school's strict graduation requirements mean that few sections of these courses, particularly advanced sections, are offered in any given semester.

One measure of the distribution of opportunities across the curriculum is the number of class sections[5] of each course offered in the core academic,[6] vocational, and other areas. The academic courses offered at Coolidge in fall 1988 made up 58 percent of the curriculum; vocational courses made up only 8 percent and other courses, 33 percent. (The "other" category includes general electives, foreign languages, fine arts, physical education, and special education, which because of its high student/teacher ratios, accounts for 12 percent of Coolidge's total fall offerings. The number of sections in physical education alone was equal to that for the entire vocational area.) The percentage of the total course offerings devoted to vocational education is lower at Coolidge than at either of the other two schools we visited.

Vocational education at Coolidge High has been severely affected by declines in enrollment and funding and by increased graduation requirements. Coolidge's requirements for English and social studies exceed the state high school graduation requirements. The state requires three years of English, while Coolidge requires four; the state requires three years of social studies, while Coolidge requires four. For math and science, however, Coolidge requires only the two years in each subject mandated by the state. Coolidge students must take six semesters of physical education, whereas the state requires four. The school's health education requirement can be met by passing both physical education and the biology course required as part of the science sequence.[7] The state requires one year of either fine arts or foreign languages; Coolidge strongly recommends that its students take one year of a foreign language in order to meet state university system requirements. In addition, Coolidge requires students to take two additional semesters of any elective; these two semesters are the *only* course slots that college-bound students could use for vocational or practical arts courses. Coolidge does not require any student to take vocational education courses for graduation. As we will

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[5]We counted combined classes as one section only (e.g., in a class that combined Drafting I and II, each course counted as 0.50 sections).

[6]Core academic classes include English, social studies, math, and science.

[7]Next year, however, a required health course will be added to the curriculum.

discuss in more detail below, Coolidge's more rigorous requirements in the academic areas have negatively affected enrollments in general electives, fine arts, and particularly vocational education. As a result, it is difficult to speak of a "vocational education" program at this school or of "vocational education students." In fact, some of our respondents think that there is less of a vocational education program at Coolidge than at other comparable high schools.

More than at the other two schools examined in this study, Coolidge's on-campus vocational program is in transition. Remnants of its traditional vocational offerings—including auto shop and wood shop—remain, but these classes are oftren characterized as teaching outmoded skills using outmoded equipment. On the other hand, respondents expressed hope that the creation of the new district technology center will result in increased interest among both students and faculty in learning a range of computer-based, vocational skills from word processing to radio and television production.

The goal of the technology center is to help students "learn to access, process, and transmit information" in a variety of ways, as part of regular vocational and academic classes as well as through special activities. The center is a district resource and will be used by high school, middle school, and elementary school students. It will include a television studio with its own satellite dish, shortwave radio links, a VAX computer with several terminals, a number of independent personal computers, and projection equipment. The industrial consortium that funded construction of the center is also committed to continually updating the equipment. However, how this center will function within the constraints imposed by other curricular requirements remains to be seen.

Off-Campus Vocational Offerings: Special Opportunities for a Few

Coolidge participates in an ROP, which provides employment training and on-the-job skill development. The program provides transportation for students to and from its class sites at several high school campuses, as well as businesses and industry locations. The 36 courses offered in the fall are diverse and include, for example, word processing (one of *only two ROP classes* that are offered on the Coolidge campus), plumbing, airframe and powerplant technician, desktop publishing, and small business management. ROP classes are open only to high school students who are in the eleventh or twelfth grade or are at least 16 years old. About 110 students (7 percent of the student body) enrolled in ROP classes in the fall of 1988. This low enrollment is probably due in part to the fact that students can apply only a limited number of ROP credits (the equivalent of

four semesters) toward high school graduation. Moreover, the logistics of time and transportation make participation in off-campus courses difficult and less appealing for many students.[8] Most of those who must work (perhaps the group who could most benefit from the program) cannot overcome these constraints.

ROP offerings both complement and to some extent duplicate on-campus, non-ROP courses. One administrator described ROP programs in general as a cost-effective way for schools to provide more vocational classes for more advanced students, a characterization that applies to Coolidge. Schools have been reluctant to use dwindling vocational education money for classes that appeal to a narrower range of students. As a result, ROP money takes over where the school's willingness to spend leaves off. The ROP has also provided jobs for teachers who might otherwise have been laid off as the curriculum has shrunk with declining enrollment and resources.

Work Experience: Minimum Opportunities

Coolidge offers two work-study programs for high school credit: Cooperative Vocational Education (CVE), run through the ROP, and the Work Ability Program for special education students. In CVE, which had 65 students enrolled in fall 1988, students must find their own jobs and work at least 10 hours a week. To earn credit for the work experience, students must attend a lecture class on campus one period a week on generic workplace skills and problems, and they must submit copies of the time sheets from their jobs. Unlike the Work Ability Program, which places 30 to 40 special education students in jobs each year and provides follow-up and counseling, CVE does little to provide information on jobs or specific work-related skills.

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[8]For example, one Coolidge student we interviewed in an Advanced Placement (AP) class is also taking a two-year ROP airframe repair and maintenance class. The class is held four nights a week for four hours each night at an aerospace firm several miles from the Coolidge campus. At the end of the two years, students are eligible to take the FAA licensing exam and, if they pass, can be employed repairing general and commercial aviation aircraft. The Coolidge student taking this course enrolled because it "looked interesting." While he is planning on entering a four-year university following high school, he hopes that airframe repair will enable him to support himself if his college plans do not materialize. If he does enter college, his skills will help him finance his education. Despite the heavy time commitment involved, this student said he was enjoying the course. His AP classmates, who did not know of his participation in the ROP course until our group interview, were clearly impressed by the time commitment it required. "When do you do your homework?" one student asked him. He replied, "On the weekends."

The Opportunity Structure: Tracking to Address Diversity

The majority of Coolidge's academic courses count as college-preparatory, as defined by the course-description handbook. Virtually all social studies offerings are applicable to college admission. In English, 77 percent of the courses are college-preparatory; in science, 69 percent; and in math, 65 percent. All academic departments offer some honors or AP courses. Students who pass AP tests in these latter courses earn an extra grade point (e.g., a grade of B would be raised to an A on the student's grade report and transcript).

Despite the large percentage of classes that meet college entrance requirements, the system by which Coolidge groups, or "tracks," its students within its academic curriculum contains more levels than do the systems at the other two schools we studied. Coolidge labels its academic classes in several ways to indicate level or track. Honors and AP are explicitly named and listed as such on transcripts, as are the ESL classes and the "T" classes (courses geared for students transitioning from ESL to mainstream courses). As in all of our case-study schools, the level of most math and science classes is indicated by the course title and content, and is thus identifiable on class schedules and transcripts. In a few cases, however, variations in name and level are for internal use only. For example, vocational chemistry and vocational physics are known in the school as less rigorous versions of those courses, but both versions are listed on transcripts as regular chemistry and physics classes. (Both versions also meet the state university admission requirement standards.)

English, social studies, and some science courses that are considered college-preparatory are divided into three additional levels. Coding is used within the school to designate fast (F), medium (M), and slow (S) sections of the same class. This coding, which appears only on the schedules used in the registration office, signals to students, counselors, and teachers the level of difficulty of the course. Since the label is not indicated on transcripts, all levels appear as college-preparatory. The system does, however, serve as a powerful guide to grading. The common practice at Coolidge is that students in M sections can earn no more than a B (3.0); those in S sections can earn no more than a C (2.0). The demoralizing effect of this grading practice is of concern to some of the school staff who are part of a larger group looking at the appropriateness of the curriculum.

Across the entire academic curriculum for the fall 1988 semester, there were 12 sections of honors/AP classes, 1 fast track section, 64 medium sections, 16 slow sections, 6 transitional sections, 5 ESL sections, and 58 nontracked sections.

ALLOCATING OPPORTUNITY: COUNSELING AND PLACEMENT

Routines with Profound Consequences

At Coolidge, as in other comprehensive high schools, the task of matching curriculum with students falls most heavily upon the four guidance counselors. Students are divided among three of the counselors according to their alpha cohort. The fourth counselor, who is in her 35th year with the district, "pulls out" two cohorts from each class: foreign students and others with English-language deficits, and students in accelerated programs.

Coolidge's placement process is, in many respects, similar to that at the other two schools we visited. And, as is also the case at the other schools, a Coolidge student's curricular opportunities are highly dependent on his or her ninth grade track placement which, in turn, is strongly influenced—if not determined—by recommendations from his or her middle school teachers.

How Students Enroll in Classes. Each spring, Coolidge counselors visit eighth graders in their classes at the middle school. They explain Coolidge's graduation requirements, elective options, and the placement process. The packet that each student receives at this meeting contains this same information, along with a copy of the school's course-description booklet and information on the entrance requirements for colleges and universities, trade schools and the armed forces. A week or so later, the counselors return to the middle school and meet with students individually (according to their alpha cohort assignment) to make up preliminary ninth grade course schedules. A programming card for each student is filled out with that student's preliminary class schedule. In mid-August, parents and students come to campus for what is called a "walkaround." They meet individually with counselors for approximately 20 minutes and actually enroll in courses. Approximately 60 percent of all ninth grade parents attend this event; parent attendance falls off during subsequent years.

Placement for incoming tenth, eleventh, and twelfth graders is very similar to that for incoming ninth graders. In the spring, students meet with their counselors to discuss their programs for the following year and fill out their programming cards; they enroll in classes during the August "walkaround."

The Basis for Course and Track Placement. Counselors at Coolidge place incoming students in their ninth grade courses on the basis of the following information: (a) the student's eighth grade CTBS (Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills) scores, (b) his or her grades, and (c) the recommendations of middle school teachers as to whether the student should be in slow-, medium-, or fast-track classes in English, social studies, and

science. Middle school teachers also recommend specific math course placement for incoming ninth graders (in basic math, algebra, or geometry). Counselors and teachers told us, however, that when there is a disparity between a student's test scores and the recommendations of the middle school teacher, the teacher recommendations tend to prevail. This is sometimes the case, even when test scores indicate that a student should be placed on a different track than the middle school teacher has recommended. Vocational courses are considered "electives"—choices made by students who have slots remaining after their academic placements have been made.

Movement Between Courses and Tracks. Track placement is not necessarily uniform across a student's program; a student may, for example, have some medium-track classes along with a fast-track class. However, our interviews indicated that it is difficult and unusual for students to move between tracks in a particular subject area at Coolidge. More than one respondent told us that when such movement occurs, it is usually from a higher to a lower track, rather than from a lower to a higher track.

Both counselors and teachers said that such upward movement did occur, but that it was a rare event. Why? Some counselors and teachers said that they encourage students to jump tracks when they feel a student is misplaced. However, the students we interviewed expressed somewhat different views. Several told us of instances of trying to persuade reluctant counselors—not always successfully—to move them to a higher-track course. One student said her counselor had discouraged her from taking an honors class even though she had earned an A in the last class she had taken in that subject, a medium-track course. "My counselor tries to talk me *out* of classes," she said. Some students in medium-track or honors courses hold a rather deterministic view of their classmates in lower-track classes. One student in an AP class told us, "The people in slow [classes], it's their choice . . . they don't want to do anything, just kick back." One of this student's classmates echoed her sentiments about students in slow-track classes: "If they're motivated [they can move up]. It's their own fault." More often, however, students told us that, despite having earned good or excellent grades, they were placed in classes at the same level or, in some instances, at a lower level. Teachers and counselors believe there is little upward movement because students are both aware of and content with their track placement, either because they are not motivated to work hard or because they fear the consequences of failing a more difficult class in terms of their GPA and chances for college admission (despite the grade limitations placed on fast, medium, and slow classes). While most of the students with whom we spoke said that they were aware of their track or level placement, they were not always content with that placement. Some

did say that they were reluctant to take a more advanced class, even when encouraged to do so, because they feared the amount of work required or because their parents were concerned about possible adverse effects on their GPA. Many students who have limited English skills transition from ESL classes into the slow track, and, according to some teachers and counselors, are fearful of getting lost in faster-paced courses. In addition, the large numbers of students assigned to each counselor, the many competing demands on each counselor's time, and constraints imposed on course offerings and enrollment by the master schedule discourage counselors from actively or periodically reevaluating the track placement of individual students. Unless students emerge as a "problem" or initiate a change on their own, their placements are not likely to be considered.

There are, however, a number of factors that can encourage or push students into either higher or lower tracks at Coolidge; these include pressure from parents, teachers, and counselors, and student preference. Parents generally pressure counselors and teachers to move their children into higher- rather than lower-track classes and, in the view of all our respondents, parental pressure carries great weight.[9] This parental pressure comes almost exclusively from the parents of Anglo students who are concerned about their children's college prospects. Counselors generally accede to parents' wishes, even when they believe such placement will prove too difficult for a student.

Student preference also plays a role in both course and track placement at Coolidge. Within the confines of Coolidge's graduation requirements and track placement process, students are allowed to choose both the classes and the teachers they wish. If students wish to change their schedules after they have enrolled, counselors will approve those changes to the extent possible within the confines of the master schedule.[10] Therefore, all Coolidge students, freshmen as well as upperclassmen, have four opportunities to choose and rechoose their classes: in the late spring, when they first plan their program for the following year; in August, when they actually enroll in courses; during the first two weeks of the fall term in September; and during the first week of the spring term.

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[9]As noted above, parents also want their children to earn good grades, and some believe that placement in a higher track will result in lower grades.

[10]Nevertheless, Coolidge students told us of numerous instances in which they had been misplaced because of the constraints of the master schedule and had great difficulty getting their counselor to change their courses. One student, for example, said that her counselor had placed her in a slow reading class after she had earned an A in her most recent (medium-level) English class. The counselor said that there was no room in any other English class; the student complained, "They overload all the classes."

Vocational and Career Coursetaking Guidance. All Coolidge students receive career counseling, as mandated by state legislation. Tenth graders take a career interest survey, and all students have access to Coolidge's career center. Teachers bring entire classes into the center, and students are free to come back at any time for additional information. The career center has college catalogs and a computer database with information about many different types of jobs. The entry on airline pilot, for example, lists average salary, information on working conditions, and training and education requirements. The center is financed primarily through school improvement program funds, with additional funding from the county.

Counselors also discuss course scheduling with students in light of the students' stated post-graduation plans. The programming card that students fill out each term asks them to list their plans following graduation (i.e., college, vocational school, military service, or work), as well as their career goal (we saw cards on which students nad listed "engineering," and "auto mechanics"). One counselor told us that she refers to these cards continuously during the year, particularly when helping students plan their course schedule.

HOW COOLIDGE VIEWS ITS CURRICULUM AND STUDENTS' OPPORTUNITIES

Perceptions of the Curriculum: Stuck in the Past

We found two widely held—if, to some extent, contradictory—perceptions of Coolidge's curriculum, how that curriculum has changed over time, and how it "fits" with the students. Some teachers noted that students in their advanced and honors classes are learning subject matter as well as technical skills to which they themselves were not exposed until college. At the same time, teachers and administrators, particularly those with a long history at the school, point to what they perceive as a decline in "rigor" since the school's early decades. One teacher told us that there used to be two fast-track classes to every slow one; the ratio is now almost one-to-one. A counselor echoed this perception of decline, saying, "What we now consider [to be an] average [class] used to be slow." Many teachers and administrators lamented that students often graduate with poor basic academic skills and that some of the vocational skills taught and the technology used to teach them are outdated. Finally, most members of the staff believe that the large number of ESL students on campus have particular difficulty with Coolidge's curriculum. Teachers and administrators told us that many immigrant students arrive at Coolidge with extremely poor math and language skills in their native language and sometimes leave school for long periods either to work or to return to their

native countries. As a result, these students finish high school—if they do in fact finish—without having caught up with native English-speaking classmates in terms of skills and substantive knowledge.

These two views are not necessarily inconsistent. Taken together, they describe a school in which there is an increasingly wide gulf between the skills, abilities, and substantive material presented to the most advanced and the most remedial students.[11] These views also characterize a school that has long viewed its curriculum as primarily serving the needs of college-bound, native English-speaking students and is now actively reexamining whether that notion is appropriate for its more diverse current student population—particularly the many students from poor educational backgrounds with poor basic skills, relatively few of whom could realistically expect to go on to four-year colleges and universities.

In general, Coolidge's on-campus vocational courses—notwithstanding opportunities planned as part of the new technology center—are not highly regarded by many faculty and staff. In addition to what are perceived to be outdated skills taught on outdated and poorly maintained equipment, we heard about "mediocre, marginal" teachers who consistently fail to fill their classes. Teachers and administrators referred to these courses as "dumping grounds" for problem kids with no place else to go.

Students had equally negative views about Coolidge's on-campus vocational offerings. In the words of one student, "Those courses are for people who are basically brain dead." However, the marginal status of Coolidge's vocational courses is perhaps more clearly revealed by the fact that many students we interviewed at first incorrectly identified such courses. In response to questions designed to elicit their perceptions of the quality and range of the school's vocational course offerings, students responded with comments about the vocational chemistry and physics courses (which, as noted above, are

[11]The comments of several students on their experiences in courses at different ability levels echo this sense of a widening gulf in the curriculum. Native English-speaking students placed in slow-track classes complained that they were "the only one speaking English." Other students described slow-track and, to a lesser extent, medium-track classes as "boring," as classes in which "you don't learn anything," and generally as having poor teachers, many of whom are former physical education instructors. Students described the teachers and the curriculum in fast-track classes in much more positive terms. Several students from one class agreed that there is a large group of students at Coolidge whose abilities put them somewhere between fast- and medium-track courses, and suggested that the school should reevaluate the material presented in courses at different levels and the number of courses offered at each track level accordingly.

less-rigorous courses in these academic subjects), and the Spanish, ceramics, and guitar classes.[12]

Despite their negative views on Coolidge's current vocational offerings, teachers and administrators expressed significant ambivalence about the function of these courses. Some believe that Coolidge should retain the vocational courses because students "enjoy" repairing old cars or working with wood, in which case the fact that the classes may be "outmoded" is less critical. Others believe that vocational courses should in fact prepare students for jobs but should concentrate less, for example, on teaching specific auto repair skills and more on socialization and inculcating generic workplace skills, i.e., stressing the importance of punctuality and appropriate dress, and perhaps teaching the "principles" of auto mechanics and repair-shop operation.

As a group, the Coolidge vocational education teaching staff are senior staff members. They recognize that their classes are increasingly used as "fillers" in the master schedule. Wood shop, auto shop, typing, and home economics classes are used by counselors as convenient places for special-needs students, i.e., those in special education and the limited-English-proficiency programs, who are mandated to be "mainstreamed" for two periods during the school day. Problem learners and discipline problems are "dumped" into the vocational education classroom, often late in the semester. One teacher recognized that the haphazard placement of students into vocational education places Coolidge outside the state model curriculum philosophy that classes should be sequenced; three teachers told us that they have as many as two or three levels of students in the same class. A home economics teacher told us that administration sees vocational education as "not very important," and students regard it as "fun and requiring no work." This same teacher experienced a painful rebuff when she was denied the opportunity to redefine an interior decorating class as a fine arts class—the administration reasoned that this might hurt the reputation of the fine arts department. Vocational education teachers also acknowledge that diminished resources have affected the vitality of the curriculum. The auto shop teacher rationalized that his obsolete shop is acceptable because he is actually preparing students to attend the local junior college auto shop program rather than to get a job after graduation. Home economic projects remain rather static, lacking the funds to add new materials and equipment. Overall, we observed frustration, yet a willingness to "make do" on the part of Coolidge's vocational education teachers.

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[12]Significantly, students we interviewed at the next school, Washington High School, exhibited the same confusion about the definition of vocational courses.

We detected a very different prevailing view of the quality, relevance, and applicability of vocational courses offered through the ROP.[13] Several respondents positively described the wide range of ROP courses, the generally higher quality of the teaching staff (many of whom are practitioners in their field as well as part-time ROP teachers), the up-to-date equipment used, and the ability of students to subsequently find employment with the skills they acquired. Several of the students we interviewed had taken or were currently taking an ROP course and had similarly positive assessments. One student said the ROP generally "has more business-oriented classes," while the non-ROP vocational courses at Coolidge teach skills that one can "use around the house." Another student said she learned things in an ROP retail sales class she thought she would not learn in school, such as how to write a resume and a cover letter. Now that she has completed the course, she thinks that it will help her get a job, and when she does so, she says, "I'll know what to do."

Perceptions of the Tracking System: Race and Class Links to Opportunities

Coolidge respondents view the tracking system with some ambivalence. On one hand, we heard many statements such as, "I think tracking is unfair" (quoted from an administrator). On the other hand, we heard much about the inability of many minority students to handle the most rigorous academic material offered at Coolidge. Few at Coolidge seem comfortable with the school's explicit tracking system, but no one seems eager to eliminate or significantly mitigate it. In fact, there is little community support for doing so. One staff member described a meeting she attended some years ago at which district officials broached the subject of doing away with Coolidge's tracking system. "The parents of GATE [Gifted and Talented Education] students went crazy," and the issue was dropped.

How does tracking work at Coolidge? What has been its effect? One administrator, whose view was shared by several other respondents, said that Coolidge's tracking system has resulted in the grouping of students by race and ethnicity. For example, of 106 students in two intermediate math courses during the fall 1988 semester, 54 were white, 13 Asian, 30 Hispanic, and 19 black. In contrast, an advanced math class with a total enrollment of 72 students contained 47 whites, 17 Asians, and only 5 Hispanics and 3 blacks. Teachers and students described comparable racial and ethnic

[13]It should be noted, however, that with exception of some students, most of our on-campus respondents who expressed generally positive views of ROP appear to have had little direct contact with it.

enrollment patterns in other slow, intermediate, and advanced sections—patterns reinforced by state data showing disproportionately low enrollment of blacks and Hispanics in advanced math, physics, and chemistry courses. Teachers also describe a difference in the subject matter and rigor across tracks at Coolidge, a difference in the achievement possible by students (since students in slow classes can earn no higher than a C, and those in medium sections can at best earn a B), and a stigma attached by teachers to the students in slow-track classes, considering them unmotivated, low-achieving, and often discipline "problems." Students, in turn, describe the course material and teachers in these lower-track courses in similarly negative terms.

As we noted earlier, there are no vocational course requirements and very few elective slots in students' course schedules, so there are in fact no "vocational education students" at Coolidge. Yet teachers generally told us that students who took Coolidge's vocational classes were found less often in the fast-track courses and more often in the lowest-level academic courses. There are clearly exceptions, however, and as Coolidge moves its vocational curriculum in the direction of teaching computer-based skills and technology, administrators and faculty expect that these courses will draw more heavily than before from the advanced, college-bound students.

Perceptions Of Guidance and Placement: Too Many Students, Too Many Problems

At Coolidge, as well as at the other two schools we visited, the responsibility for placing students in classes that meet their perceived needs does not rest easily on the shoulders of the men and women to whom it is assigned. As a group, counselors were often more frustrated, more disaffected, and, in some instances, angrier than any other group we interviewed.

At each of the schools in our study, guidance counselors play a critical but difficult role in the lives of the students to whom they are assigned. The counselors have—and view themselves as having—many, sometimes contradictory, responsibilities. They are student allies and confidants, yet they are also disciplinarians; they are recruiters and boosters, yet they are also gatekeepers. They believe that these inherently contradictory roles make their jobs difficult. In addition, counselors at every school poignantly described the dramatically increasing numbers of students with serious drug, gang, family, or economic problems. The counselors at Coolidge believe that their job has been made even more difficult—if not impossible—in recent years by the increasingly large

numbers of students assigned to them,[14] the lack of school leadership, and the pressure to fill the master schedule.

Significantly, we heard little from Coolidge counselors about school norms or a philosophy of counseling and placement. Their daily lives are so constrained and overcommitted that they could speak only of "how it is," not of how it is supposed to be. Their offices are little larger than closets, and the paper crammed within most of those offices appears to have gotten out of control. Each of Coolidge's counselors has a long tenure in the district, and each expressed a sense of failure and frustration in being able to do little more than keep up with their responsibilities with respect to discipline, course placement, and the seemingly endless changes in the master schedule. We heard a lot about their efforts to help the many students with overwhelming personal problems—one respondent said that counselors spend most of their time dealing with 10 to 15 percent of students who are "in crisis"—but very little about their efforts to offer students long-term guidance or counseling in terms of their future careers. However, those students who are identified as high-ability and who are assigned to the "pullout" counselor may get more attention, as that cohort is smaller than those assigned to the three other counselors (300 to 350 students, compared with 450).

Two of Coolidge's counselors have become profoundly disaffected. One decided to leave the school abruptly, within a month of our interview, because, he said, he was "drowning in numbers"—the increased numbers of students to whom he was assigned, many of whom have more severe personal and academic problems than he has seen in the past—and because the school has so few resources with which to help him help these students. "Do you know what this hour has taken?" he asked in frustration during our interview with him. "This hour can never be gotten back, it has to be made up." The students with whom we spoke had almost universally positive views of this counselor. Those assigned to him as well as others who knew him described him as supportive, as encouraging students who might not otherwise consider applying to college to do so, and as "a friend." Students said they felt they could walk into his office any time; moreover, this counselor often stopped students he knew on campus to ask them about their courses and other activities. Another counselor, with similar intensity, expressed a different sort of frustration, a frustration born of her belief that students are not motivated, not forced to take responsibility for themselves and their education. "We're losing ground in the U.S.

[14]Each of the counselors with an alpha cohort is now responsible for 450 students , an increase of 150 over the previous year.

in terms of education. We've gone too far trying to make school relevant and giving students too many choices. A lot of it is not relevant and shouldn't have to be." She said we "overindulge kids," noting that "too many choices can be stressful." Referring to her self-admitted "directive" approach to guidance, she said, "I think I know better. I've made mistakes, but many of my choices for kids are right."

The policy of allowing students to choose their classes and teachers and then change their mind draws complaints from a broad spectrum of the teachers and administrators with whom we spoke. The counselors, who must approve all such changes, not surprisingly voiced the strongest opposition. Several counselors told us that they spend full time during the first weeks of each term and near the end of the school year counseling students regarding changes. One counselor also objected to this policy because it is "not realistic for life." One of the things that high school students should learn during four years, according to this counselor, is how to get along with different people and different styles. "One has to learn to get along; we don't teach that here." Teachers object to the disruption caused by students moving in and out of their classes during the first weeks, and administrators complain about the difficulty of evening out class enrollments, since popular teachers routinely have large classes, leaving less popular teachers with much smaller groups. Many students expressed frustration that because counselors had to spend so much time approving program changes, they were often unavailable for advice concerning college, careers, and even course selection. "My counselor doesn't do much," said one student, echoing the sentiments of many others, "she waits for you to come talk to her."[15]

Some teachers and counselors told us of instances when they encouraged students to move into a more advanced track. Such suggestions were most often made because the counselor believed that the student had been misplaced. However, teachers believe that counselors sometimes place students in high-track sections because those classes generally have lower enrollments than slow- or medium-track classes.

Many teachers mentioned instances of requesting that a student be transferred out of a class, either because the student belonged in a slower class or because he or she was a "behavior problem." Students transferred out of a class because of disruptive behavior are often moved into a slow section or into a vocational education class. Because of increased graduation requirements and the poor reputation that some vocational teachers

[15]Coolidge administrators are considering a move away from the policy of student choice and are currently examining a number of computer software packages that program students into courses on the basis of student preference along with other factors.

have among students, these classes are consistently underenrolled and have room to accept the transfers. Because of this practice, however, these courses have, as noted above, become labeled as "dumping grounds."

CURRICULUM ORIGINS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Response to Outside Forces

Coolidge's curriculum—both vocational and academic—is the product of many different, long-term influences. It reflects many assumptions, some of them contradictory, about the ability, motivation, and educational needs of Coolidge students, their future occupations, and the school's ability—or inability—to meet and shape student aspirations and needs. This section explores some of the factors that have historically influenced the shape and direction of Coolidge's curriculum. Most of these influences are not unique to Coolidge or to our two other schools.

One district official described Coolidge as having been historically resistant to curriculum change, as stuck in a valley of inertia. The pace of change has been called "very slow, too slow." The principal commented that because Coolidge is the only high school in the district, there has been little "cross-fertilization" or competition from other high schools and less direction from the district concerning curriculum development than occurs in bigger districts.

When such change has occurred, moreover, it has generally consisted of increasing the number of academic credits required for graduation in response to state, district, or university mandates. Many with whom we spoke believe that in view of the major change in the demographic characteristics of Coolidge High's student body, the present curriculum does not "meet the needs" of its students.

Effects of Declining Enrollment on Opportunities

As noted earlier, enrollment at Coolidge has declined steadily for the past several years. The corresponding decline in school funding, in turn, has reduced the number and range of course offerings.

The Emphasis on Academics in State Reforms

One of the district administrators with whom we spoke characterized change in the curriculum at Coolidge as occurring if and only if it is mandated. The most powerful forces for change have historically been state graduation requirements and state university admissions criteria. There is a strong consensus among those with whom we spoke that recent state legislation increasing graduation requirements, coupled with the

state school superintendent's emphasis on academics, has clearly reduced the importance of—and available funding for—vocational education in comprehensive high schools such as Coolidge.

Few of our respondents perceive the state's model curriculum for academic courses, which is being phased in at Coolidge over a several-year period, as a major influence on course content or on the way courses are taught. Several Coolidge teachers contend that their courses already meet the model curriculum, and thus implementation will not change what they teach—a view that is not shared by some at the district level.

School officials view Coolidge's new technology center as consistent with the technological emphasis of the state's model curriculum for vocational education. However, teachers and administrators also view the requirement that vocational courses be consistent with the state curriculum framework to qualify for funding as exerting a demoralizing effect on traditional vocational education course offerings.

Opportunistic Responses to Federal and State Vocational Education Support

Some of the district administrators, as well as individual Coolidge teachers, have become quite adept at soliciting federal and state money both to support existing vocational programs and to initiate new ones. Coolidge has received federal Perkins money for its vocational courses since the early 1970s. The money initially funded industrial arts courses (beginning auto courses and beginning shop courses). Today, the school also receives state funding for consumer homemaking and business education classes (such as accounting courses).[16] In general, Coolidge's approach has been quite opportunistic. Administrators and teachers have pursued funding with the fewest strings attached—in terms of mandated curriculum, necessary credentials, or required equipment—and concentrated on subjects and teachers who can most easily meet the grant-getting and reporting requirements. Consequently, developing a program of vocational studies that match job opportunities in the community has been secondary, if it has been considered at all.

Decline of Community Press for Vocational Education

As noted above, most community and parent pressure focuses on the academic curriculum. Vocal parents generally support the increase in graduation requirements and

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[16]The concept for the technology center was originally submitted as part of Coolidge's application for funds from a state demonstration grant competition. When the application was turned down, Coolidge teachers and administrators obtained funding for the center from a consortium of local private firms.

the addition of new advanced academic courses. There is now little community interest in or input to Coolidge's traditional vocational program. Moreover, the principal's own ambivalence about—if not general disinterest in—the role of vocational education has meant that the school has done little to sustain or revive community interest. A local education committee that is open to any resident of the Coolidge district meets monthly to discuss a range of matters that pertain to district schools. But there is a consensus among the administrators we interviewed that this group represents the district "ruling class" and is interested in academic and disciplinary matters to the virtual exclusion of vocational education. Six or seven years ago, there was a local vocational education advisory board composed of four or five influential town leaders who expressed their views both within the school and outside the school community. One administrator told us, for example, of a garage owner who had complained to the board that he was very dissatisfied with the vocational preparation of the Coolidge students he had hired. Some people at Coolidge believe that if such critics were around now, they could help to command additional funds by pressuring the district to improve the program.

Press for Change in a Climate of Inertia

Many at Coolidge would like to move the school's curriculum in new directions that include greater differentiation. In particular, some school and district administrators are now considering implementing a "vocational track" for non-college-bound students, particularly those who enter high school with serious academic deficits. This change in curriculum, which is still in the discussion phase, would presumably set less rigorous academic requirements for graduation than currently exist and allow more room in students' schedules for vocational courses. At the same time, however, the parents of college-bound students are pressuring the district and the school to add additional honors and AP classes.

In the interim, Coolidge has embarked on a systematic review of its curriculum, a process that many on campus and in the district regard as being long overdue. The administrative reorganization that was implemented during the 1988-89 school year, placing emphasis on curriculum and instruction, as well as the addition of a new dean from outside the district, has lent some momentum to this class-by-class review. The district has also tried to encourage community participation and discussion between teachers and the administration.

As a result of this reevaluation process, Coolidge is planning a class on small business entrepreneurship that the school hopes will both qualify for credit in vocational

education and meet the state economics requirement. More significant, however, are Coolidge's hopes for its technology center. Its proponents view the center as a means by which to introduce technology training throughout the high school curriculum in much the same way that others speak about "writing through the curriculum." However, specific plans for the staffing and use of the center have yet to be formulated.

The principal's lack of interest in vocational education issues may constrain program improvement, campus participation, and perhaps even additional funding. It is the responsibility of Coolidge's principal (on behalf of the district) to oversee the ROP that serves his district. He must coordinate ROP course offerings with two other high schools (in two other districts) and must provide access for students at any of the three high schools to ROP courses offered at those high school campuses. Yet one district official told us that the principal appears reluctant to even attend the coordinating meetings with representatives from the other schools. This difficulty, added to the more general perception of inertia, suggests that significant change is not likely to occur at Coolidge.

WHO GETS WHAT AND WHY AT COOLIDGE: COUNSELING AND CURRICULUM PATTERNS

Many of our Coolidge respondents perceive the high school as being at an important crossroads in its thirty-year history. There is a strong sense, particularly among the older teachers and administrators, that the school has "declined" in prestige, academic rigor, and the caliber of its students since the "good old days" of the 1960s and early 1970s. Most respondents attribute that decline to severe funding cutbacks and the attendant loss of programs and staff, lack of community involvement, and a general decline in student motivation that has plagued all high schools. Many at Coolidge, however, also believe that the school's decline is due to the changing demographic characteristics of the student body. Where the student body was once virtually all white, more than half of Coolidge's current students are non-white. Many, although not all, faculty and administrators perceive differences between the aspirations, involvement, and achievement of the school's growing cohort of Hispanic and black students and those of the Asian and white students. Our respondents characterized many in the former group as having little or no interest in going to college—and a minimal chance for admission; as being relatively uninvolved in school activities; as having poor academic skills upon entrance, particularly in English and math; and as having poor motivation and study habits, which result in poor academic progress during high school.

Coolidge has long maintained a conscious policy of grouping students according to their perceived academic ability. This tracking system appears to be more deliberate and more elaborate at Coolidge than at the other two schools in our study. Moreover, teachers and administrators perceive an increase in the proportion of slow and medium sections and a relative decline in the proportion of fast sections.[17] In addition, most respondents told us that while many of Coolidge's fast-track courses are well-integrated, the slow sections tend to be disproportionately non-white. Hispanic and black students tend to be more frequently placed in the medium and slower classes, while white and Asian students dominate the higher-track classes. Guidance and counseling practices may tend to perpetuate this pattern. The organization of the counseling staff and the many competing demands on the counselors' limited time results in counseling resources being devoted primarily either to students with high academic ability and motivation or to those with severe behavioral or personal problems. Students with low to average academic skills tend to fall through the cracks of Coolidge's counseling structure.

As a result of these trends, there is growing perception that Coolidge's curriculum—which has become more rigorous and academic in recent years in response to state mandates—no longer serves the needs of a large group of students on campus. Staff members are beginning to talk about building some flexibility into the current, rather inflexible curriculum, in order to provide course offerings more consistent with the perceived needs of these students. But this staff perception centers largely on redefining the school's academic curriculum rather than on reviving or reintegrating vocational skills and curricula. There is some discussion about requiring students to take fewer and less rigorous academic classes, which would allow them more opportunity for vocational or occupation-specific training. But there is very little talk about improving the quality or relevance of vocational offerings.

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[17]We must caution, however, that we have no historical data to either support or refute these perceptions.

III. WASHINGTON HIGH SCHOOL: THE STRUGGLE TO REMAIN "COMPREHENSIVE"

WASHINGTON AND ITS COMMUNITY

Washington High School opened in 1962 to serve families in an upper-middle-class white community in a large, West Coast urban area. Washington is a quiet and orderly campus. Even during "passing" periods, there is little of the noise and bustle of other older schools, in part because of the open space between buildings and the large number of smaller buildings. The impression is of a school that works well, calmly, and efficiently.

Like many schools in the county, including Coolidge, Washington has experienced a decline in the size of its student body, and its demographic composition has significantly changed. Washington has approximately 1,700 students; enrollment has dropped between 100 and 150 students in each of the past several years. Where the school was once almost entirely white,[1] it now has a large and growing cohort of Asian students—30 percent, as compared with 68 percent Anglos. Blacks and Hispanics make up only 1 to 2 percent of Washington's student body. Because the cost of housing has risen faster in the Washington neighborhood in recent years than in surrounding areas, the high school increasingly attracts students from wealthier families; less than 1 percent of the student body qualifies for AFDC.

Washington has a large number of immigrants in its student population, most of them Asian. Some are the children of foreign military families stationed temporarily in the United States. Currently, 27 different countries are represented in the Washington student body. Eleven percent of the students—many of them immigrants—are designated as being limited-English-proficient (LEP).

Although some respondents feel parent involvement is not as strong as it could be, Washington High parents are still much more involved in the school than are those at the other two schools we studied. The principal characterized the parents as "very supportive," as wanting to help with the school, and as providing a "great PTSA." Parents help with textbook distribution each year, assist in various school offices as needed and in past years have, on a voluntary basis, run the math lab and the career center. Parents have organized band boosters and athletic boosters clubs; they financially

[1] "A few years ago," according to the principal, only 9 percent of the students were non-white.

support the academic decathalon team, provide three annual scholarships, and fund excellence awards.

The community also provides support for some of the school's vocational programs. For example, there is a "Young Chefs" competition for students from a number of local high schools in which Washington students have long participated and performed well. There is an active local Future Homemakers of America chapter that sponsors competitions in which Washington students participate.

WASHINGTON AS AN ORGANIZATION

Centralized Control and Standardization

In contrast to the district administration at Coolidge, Washington's district administration is highly centralized, with a number of traditions or norms that strongly influence curriculum and student placement at its high schools. The district prides itself on maintaining four equally good high schools with a standardized curriculum and a strong focus on academic excellence. At the same time, it has endeavored to maintain each school as a "comprehensive" high school, offering a mix of academic, vocational, fine arts, and athletic opportunities. Moreover, the district has in recent years taken steps to "detrack" some of the academic curriculum. As discussed in greater detail below, the district's intervention has generated some resentment on the part of Washington faculty and administrators.

The district superintendent considers the current school board to be one of the best in the state. Although its major orientation is academic, it has maintained its support of the ROC and the on-campus vocational program. (Some vocational teachers, however, question the board's commitment to their programs.)

The Principal and Staff: Allies

The principal is a white male in his fifties who has spent his entire career in the district. The 1988-89 school year was his fifth as principal at Washington; he began his career as a teacher on the Washington faculty. He is an ardent booster of his school and told us that he would not want to be principal anywhere else. He believes that his school has a "terrific reputation," that the staff is "magnificent," and that the students are highly motivated and involved.

His demeanor, like the atmosphere of the school, bespeaks control. He is calm, friendly, cooperative, and extremely organized; he is neither outspoken nor highly opinionated, but is direct and frank. In contrast to the staff at Coolidge and particularly at

McKinley, administrators and staff with whom we spoke at Washington regard their principal highly and generally view him as a supportive ally.

Washington has three assistant principals, among whom responsibility for the curriculum is divided by subject matter. There are four counselors, each of whom is assigned approximately 400 students, allocated alphabetically.

Many of the current 69 faculty members came to Washington when the school opened in 1962. This cohort is now beginning to retire: Washington expects to lose between eight and nine veterans this year. Apart from retirement, Washington has lost teachers as a result of steadily declining student enrollment. The district mandates a pupil/teacher ratio no lower than 27:1, so the school had to "excess" four teachers last year.

In stark contrast to the situation at McKinley, morale among the teaching and administrative staff at Washington is generally good. One teacher's comments were typical: "[Washington's] administrators and counselors are the best I've seen. The administration is superb, supportive." To the extent that our respondents expressed frustration, it was generally directed at district rather than school administrators and at district rather than school policies. For academic teachers, frustration centered on the district's policy of maintaining a standardized curriculum at each of its high schools. Vocational teachers talked more often about the steady loss of classes and, consequently, teaching positions.

WASHINGTON AS AN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION

The Washington Mission: Comprehensive, but Academics Come First

One district administrator characterized Washington as a "rah-rah-boom-de-yay school," an all-American high school that emphasizes sports and band as well as high academic achievement. However, the principal's goals for 1988-89 stressed the academic aspects of its comprehensive mission. Because of the expanding cohort of foreign-born students and lower-than-desired test scores across the student body in English, his major emphasis for the past few years has been on the language arts, particularly writing. This emphasis is not limited to English teachers; the school is working with the whole faculty to stress "writing across the curriculum" and "writing to learn." The principal also intends to explore strategies to improve teaching in heterogeneous classes. Finally, he wants to increase the peer coaching among teachers that is designed to evaluate and improve teaching.

Washington Views Its Students: Anglos Just Get By, Asians Really Try

Consistent with Washington's emphasis on academic achievement, its students have scored well on all of the standard measures of student performance. Despite the large percentage of students whose native language is not English, the class of 1988 scored at the 85th percentile on the state's reading assessment test; their math scores placed them in the 95th percentile. Fifty-eight percent of the class of 1988 took the Scholastic Aptitude Test. Again, their mean score on the math portion of the test was well above the state average; their average verbal score was slightly below.

The school estimates that 40 percent of its graduating seniors go on to four-year colleges and universities. State data show that 13 percent of the 1986 seniors actually enrolled in public 4-year schools in the state. While Washington's estimate may be inflated, a substantial number of its seniors probably go on to private colleges or to schools out of state. The school also reports that an additional 35 percent attend two-year colleges, making Washington's total estimated college-going rate identical to that of Coolidge. Washington's estimate of community college-going is quite consistent with state reports that 32 percent of the class of 1986 actually enrolled in state-supported community colleges.

However, in contrast to Coolidge (and even more to McKinley), Washington's relatively low attrition rate of 12 percent (and the school's estimate of a yearly dropout rate of less than 2 percent) makes these scores and estimates of college attendance a fairly accurate reflection of the performance of the total class that began as ninth graders.[2] Considering attrition, the adjusted overall rate for students attending state colleges and universities is 39 percent—only slightly higher than that at Coolidge.[3]

Comparing Washington to another high school in the district that draws a slightly more affluent student body, a district administrator told us that Washington has fewer disaffected students, fewer drug problems, and fewer students aiming for admission to "the Harvards and Princetons." Washington sends more students to the state university and is more representative of "gung-ho," high-achieving high schools.

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[2]Washington's attrition rate was calculated by comparing the size of the 1987-88 ninth and twelfth grade classes, with an adjustment to account for the enrollment decline of approximately 125 students each year over the past four years.

[3]This adjustment does not take into consideration students who may be attending other schools. If we take the school's overall estimate of college attendance, the adjusted rate still totals 66 percent, compared with Coolidge's adjusted rate of 56 percent, resulting from twice the rate of attrition.

In general, however, the Washington staff's attitudes toward students were not unequivocally positive. Their expectations of students, their sense of student needs, and their view of how the school can meet those needs are less deterministic than those of the Coolidge staff. (The Washington teachers did not generally characterize large numbers of students as being incapable of learning.) Nevertheless, some staff believe that many of Washington's students are unmotivated and have "unrealistic" expectations of attending college. One teacher said that "*few* of the students in the general track are motivated; maybe they feel secure in the classes they're in." A counselor told us that most of the students are "just getting by"; they simply do what they must to meet course and graduation requirements, and no more. As a result, several faculty expressed frustration with the expectations of the state and the district that they nonetheless teach as though most students are motivated and will in fact attend college.

On the other hand, many of our respondents believe that some students at Washington have a real chance to make dramatic improvement during their high school career. One math teacher told us, for example, that students can make dramatic progress if the teacher does not conclude that they "can't do it" just because they are not "doing it" on the first day. Several teachers strongly believe that Washington has "good supports" for kids to become successful, such as ESL or remedial courses. Teachers at Washington "will push students."

The cultural and ethnic diversity of the student body is a tremendous source of pride to many teachers and administrators. It also provides the impetus for a number of on-campus activities aimed at bridging cultures. There is an Asian cultural club that has translated or commissioned translations of the student handbook into many languages, including Spanish, Persian, Korean, Chinese, and Japanese. In addition, last year Washington students compiled a book of student poetry. Each poem appears in its author's native language as well as in English. The school also has an "adopt-a-friend" program in which incoming students are matched with an older student from the same ethnic or national background.

Apart from these activities, however, we found quite differing views as to the extent to which racial and ethnic groups mix on campus. The principal said that there is a fair amount of interethnic dating, particularly between whites and Asians. He also said that while there is "no tension per se," students from different ethnic groups, particularly Asians, tended to "cluster" during lunch. When he and other staff members noticed this grouping, they talked with the students, who said that they felt more comfortable with each other because of their common language. One counselor told us that there is, in fact,

some racial tension at Washington. It is subtle, this counselor said, and is manifested in the fact that white students sometimes do not look the Asians in the eye and vice-versa, and not all of the foreign students feel they are a part of the school. One teacher paraphrased Anglo students who say of the Asians, "All they do is study; of course they win all the prizes." The comments of many of the students with whom we spoke indicate that staff perceptions of ethnic tension on campus are accurate. When we asked students to comment on the extent to which teachers and administrators seem to treat students of different ethnic and racial background differently, one student noted that "[teachers] are always talking about 'the smart Orientals'...there are so many kids [here] named Kim." Other students contend that teachers help Asian students more than those from other ethnic groups. One student said that the teachers are particularly nice to the Asian students in his government class, but "yell" at the rest of the class; "they don't teach us." Washington has a campus relations committee which meets twice a month to work on such problems.

As in the other schools we visited, teachers' characterizations of and expectations for students vary according to the ethnicity or ability of those students. Teachers and administrators themselves expressed remarkably consistent views about the contribution of the large group of Asian students on campus. One teacher's comments were typical of many at Washington: "I love classes with lots of Orientals; there are no discipline problems, they are motivated." And two Washington teachers who taught summer school last year made similar observations. One said that he was the "only Caucasian in the classroom—all the white kids were at the beach while the Asians were taking classes." Another noted that there were 20 Asian and 2 white students in his class at the start of the summer—"before long the whites dropped out to go to the beach." However, several teachers view the Asian students as generally choosing not to participate in vocational or practical arts courses except as required for graduation.

THE OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURE: THE CURRICULUM

Washington High School had to make few changes in response to the new state graduation requirements. Both the state and Washington require two years of mathematics, two years of science, three years of social studies, and one year of foreign language or fine arts. Washington adds one year to the state requirement for English, requiring four years rather than three.

Washington is unique among the three schools we studied in that it also requires all students to take one year of practical arts. Students can meet this requirement by

taking courses in business education, computer science, home economics, or industrial arts. Alternatively, they can take certain courses at the ROC. The practical arts requirement clearly boosts Washington's vocational education enrollment, although the number of class sections devoted to vocational education is still very small compared with other areas.

In fall 1988, 59 percent of the class sections offered at Washington were in core academic subjects, 9 percent in vocational education, and 32 percent in other areas such as foreign language, arts, and physical education.

The Washington course-description booklet provides detailed and fairly clear information about all courses offered, graduation requirements, college application requirements, educational opportunities at local junior colleges, and, importantly, career planning. For each subject area described in the overview of the curriculum (e.g., business, drama, math), the book outlines possible career objectives, thereby extending the context for student curriculum planning beyond the limits of high school graduation.

The ROC: Opportunities for a Few

The ROC is a county-administrated job training effort for both high school and adult students, offering a wide range of occupationally specific courses, including merchandising, electronics, cosmetology, health services, and aircraft mechanics. The ROC accepts only students who are in the eleventh or twelfth grade or are at least 16 years old. Some classes are held at business sites and schools, as well as at the center.

The ROC sponsors two courses, child care and automotive occupations, as two-hour sessions on the Washington campus. About 35 students participate in these classes. Free bus transportation is available to take students from their home campus to other ROC courses. In fall 1988, 39 students (only 2 percent of the student body) were enrolled in classes at the center.

Work Experience: Opportunities for Even Fewer

Fifty students (2 classes) participate in the work experience program at Washington. This program requires that students find their own jobs, work 18 hours a week, and take part in a generic work skills class on campus in order to receive a maximum of 10 credits for the semester. The Washington coordinator for the program spoke quite frankly, describing it as "just a credit mill." He said that he and the principal would like to drop the program, but the district requires that they maintain at least one class.

The Opportunity Structure: Tracking Without Formal Tracking

Washington divides its academic curriculum into college-preparatory—81 percent of the academic class sections—and non-college-preparatory—19 percent of the academic class sections. The non-college 19 percent includes general education classes that do not meet university admission requirements and remedial courses. Of the total college-preparatory class sections, 19 percent are honors/AP, 4 percent are ESL, and 77 percent are general college-preparatory.

Although the district and school have "detracked" Washington's English and social studies classes in recent years, teachers and counselors told us that informal ability grouping persists in those subjects. Both departments offer remedial and honors classes for each grade level, and the English department also offers a range of opportunities for students of different abilities who are in neither remedial nor honors classes. For example, although English 1 and 2 (for ninth and tenth graders) are not tracked, eleventh graders are placed in English classes, based on their previous grades, that are designed either for college-bound or non-college-bound students. Those perceived to be in the latter category are generally placed in English 3, a course that one counselor described as having been "watered down" to accommodate low-achieving eleventh graders, or in a course on science fiction and fantasy literature, the only elective available to students in this group. High achievers, on the other hand, can select from a range of faster-paced English electives, so counselors generally do not place them in English 3.

In addition, although Washington faculty and staff refer to science and math courses as "sequential," courses in these departments are essentially tracked. For example, Washington students typically take a year of biology to fulfill part of their science requirement. The science department offers three tracks, or levels, of biology: life sciences, for low-achieving students; biology, for moderate achievers; and honors biology. This division is similar to that for physical science courses, where students are placed in earth sciences (the lower-track course), fundamentals of chemistry or fundamentals of physics (for those in the middle range), or honors physics or chemistry.

ALLOCATING OPPORTUNITY: COUNSELING AND PLACEMENT

The placement process at Washington is similar to that at our other two schools. In April, counselors hold an assembly for eighth graders at the middle schools. They review graduation requirements and course offerings and give students materials to take home to their parents. They then hold a parent meeting, which 75 to 80 percent of the parents attend to meet in groups with the counselors. Finally, counselors return to the

junior high schools, meet in small groups with the students who will be their advisees, and enroll them in their ninth grade classes. At the beginning of the ninth grade, each student meets with his or her counselor and develops a four-year curriculum plan.

Placement for tenth, eleventh, and twelfth graders is similar to that for freshmen. Each spring, counselors meet with small groups of advisees (five or six students) to enroll them in classes for the following year. Students sit at a computer terminal with the counselor to data-enter their classes. Washington also sponsors a Back-to-School Night each September for all returning students and their parents. Parents must sign off on students' schedules each year.

Academic Classes: A Lot of Hoops

Washington's counselors place incoming freshmen in classes on the basis of their eighth grade CTBS scores and grades, and recommendations from middle school teachers. Eighth grade homeroom and academic teachers jointly fill out a Washington High School Evaluation of Student form. The form asks teachers to recommend track placement for math and science, and honors, remedial, or ESL placement in English and social studies. The middle school teachers are asked to evaluate students on the quality of their work, their study habits, and any special aptitudes (such as in practical or performing arts, leadership, or athletics).

Counselors generally weight placement criteria in the following order of importance: test results, teacher recommendations, parental input, and student input. However, for borderline cases, counselors and teachers said they weight teacher recommendations "very highly." As at the other schools, parent pressure can often determine a child's course placement.

In eighth grade (as well as in subsequent years), students who fail to pass a portion of the district proficiency exam are placed in remedial lab classes, and those who pass admissions tests for a subject are scheduled into honors classes. However, the honors test is waived for some students who have earned an A in a previous honors class, and sometimes for students whose parents have specifically requested honors placement.

As occurs at other schools, students' English and math performance are used as a guide for subsequent placement in those subjects. However, Washington also uses English proficiency to determine social studies placement. For example, students enrolled in reading lab are generally also enrolled in remedial social studies. Similarly, math is used as a guide for science class placement. However, some teachers told us that these criteria can lead to incorrect placement. The science department, in particular,

would like to reinstate a science placement test to more accurately match student abilities and course offerings.

Vocational Classes: Few, If Any, Hoops

While there are formal prerequisites for entrance into some vocational courses, the need to maintain minimum enrollments in these courses often takes precedence. For instance, students who enroll in the auto shop course offered on campus through the ROC must be 16 years of age or in eleventh or twelfth grade. Moreover, students can only get credit once for this class. Yet the teacher told us that in order to maintain the minimum enrollment necessary to offer the class, he does admit students who are under 16 as well as those who have previously taken it for credit. Similarly, the beginning accounting course (intended for eleventh and twelfth graders) is now admitting tenth graders in an effort to bolster enrollments. As discussed below, vocational teachers believe that counselors sometimes use their classes as placements of "last resort" for students with severe behavior and academic problems.

Limited Movement Between Tracks

Based on our interviews with faculty and administrators, it appears that the tracking or grouping system is less rigid at Washington than at Coolidge, and that movement between tracks occurs more frequently. English teachers said that most of their remedial students routinely move into regular English classes upon passing the proficiency examination. Moreover, the staff gave us examples of students who had made dramatic or unexpected progress during the course of their high school career. One counselor told us that she looks for "at-risk" students—those with high test scores whose grades start dropping—and tries to intervene with them and their parents to get them out of remedial classes. Some teachers, in fact, view vocational classes as a way to help "turn around" kids who are experiencing difficulty in academic classes.

Nonetheless, movement between tracks is not common at Washington; one student we interviewed commented that "the average person just stays in the same level all the way through."[4] Teachers and counselors offered a variety of explanations for the lack of track movement. Several teachers told us that students in the remedial classes are either "scared" to move up or unwilling to work harder. Teachers also reported that they have experienced little parental pressure to move students out of remedial classes, even after

[4]In general, the Washington students had much less to say about the school's tracking system than did those with whom we spoke at Coolidge.

those students have passed the proficiency examination. Finally, teachers themselves expressed reluctance to move students out of remedial classes or tracks. For example, completion of remedial U.S. history often means that a student is automatically placed in remedial economics.[5] One teacher told us that he rarely suggests that a student transfer out of his remedial classes; he estimates that he has made such a request perhaps "three or four times during the past seven or eight years." More often, he said, students in the honors class want to transfer into the regular class. That has happened two to three times in the past four to five years because of the students' fear of failure.

In the sciences, there appears to be more downward than upward movement. One science teacher told us that each year, approximately 40 percent of the students who take biology, the middle-level life science course, will go on to take physics, the comparable physical science course; 1 to 2 students will advance to honors physics; and approximately 60 percent will move to fundamentals of physics, a lower-level class.

The lack of track movement may result primarily from the view expressed by counselors and teachers at Washington that students should be placed where they will "succeed." One respondent told us that students tend to choose courses appropriate to their interests and abilities. This view sometimes manifests itself in placement decisions that tend to diminish rather than expand students' abilities and opportunities. While counselors do sometimes push students to try something beyond what their previous grades and test scores would indicate they are capable of achieving, department heads can and often do overrule counselors' recommendations.

Vocational or Career-Oriented Coursetaking Guidance

Washington's career guidance resources are similar to those at Coolidge. But Washington's students usually must take the initiative in obtaining information on careers and post-secondary educational opportunities. Counselors generally respond to students who express interest in a particular field, but none reported that they regularly initiate such discussions, particularly among non-college-bound students.

The school has a career center that is open to all students. Entering ninth graders tour the facility as part of their orientation program and are free to return whenever they wish, although the principal reports that eleventh and twelfth graders use the center most

[5]In response to our question, "Would a student who earned an A in a remedial class be subsequently placed in a non-remedial class?" one teacher answered affirmatively but said he has given only one A in the past four years in these courses, "largely because of kids' [poor] reading abilities."

heavily. The center maintains catalogs and other information on career opportunities. It also sponsors speakers throughout the year, including representatives from various career fields and from the state college and university system. In addition, the center administers two career interest tests to students, one voluntary and one required of all students. The results of these tests are sent home to parents.

Each of the counselors meets with seniors in groups, and often individually, to discuss students' career plans. One counselor reported that when students express an interest in a particular business or trade she directs them to the local ROC or, if appropriate, to Washington's on-campus vocational courses. She told us that she often advises students to sample a number of courses or fields at the ROC.[6]

Another counselor was openly critical of Washington's lack of career guidance. Students are, he believes, "absolutely ignorant" of the jobs they might hold in the future and the requirements for those jobs. The majority of students at Washington, he said, "just go through, not knowing where their target is." He said that Washington's career center needs to be "beefed up"; he believes the person who staffs the center is "outstanding," but because of funding restrictions, the center is open only three mornings a week.

HOW WASHINGTON VIEWS ITS CURRICULUM AND STUDENTS' OPPORTUNITIES

Perceptions of the Curriculum: Increasingly Academic and Inflexible

Like those at Coolidge, many of the Washington respondents view the school's curriculum as becoming increasingly differentiated. Changing state mandates, combined with the school's tradition of and emphasis on preparing students for college, have caused Washington's academic curriculum to become increasingly rigorous. At the same time, because of the influx of students with language deficiencies and other limitations, Washington has added more remedial classes. Some of our respondents believe that, as a result, the gap between the skills and subject matter presented to students in the honors classes and those in the remedial classes is widening. Yet, because of the *nature* of the demographic change that has occurred in Washington's student population—a large influx of Asian students and a relatively small number of Hispanic and black students—and prevailing staff expectations for those students, Washington faculty and

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[6]Curiously, the example she related in this context concerned an obviously atypical student, an honors student who was considering a career as a physician and who took courses in paramedic training and X-ray technology in order to learn skills that would support him through college and to confirm his interest in medicine.

administrators do not perceive the curriculum to be as "unsuited" to student needs as it is at our other two schools. At Washington, we heard little about revising the curriculum to meet "unmet" needs.

The frustration and dissatisfaction expressed by Washington staff centered on the district's efforts to maintain a standardized curriculum across all four high schools. That policy, combined with increasingly demanding state graduation requirements, has meant that Washington's curriculum, like that at other schools, has become increasingly academic and increasingly inflexible in recent years. Washington faculty and staff strongly believe that these changes have occurred at the expense of the school's vocational and practical arts curriculum. In that respect, the changes signify a clear shift away from the school's tradition of offering a "comprehensive" curriculum—a shift that is troubling to many.

Washington faculty and staff are of one mind in their views of the school's academic curriculum. While they are proud of the high quality of their academic courses, respondents repeatedly stated that the curriculum is too academically focused and driven by the requirements for college admission. One counselor said, "One of the greatest frustrations we face is that 70 percent of the school's curriculum is directed toward the 30 percent of the students who will go on to [four-year] colleges." Because so many courses at Washington are geared to college-bound students, "kids drop like flies"—that is, many students experience a great deal of failure and frustration.

This counselor and others with whom we spoke believe that Washington has lost sight of its mission as a comprehensive high school. In focusing on academics, one respondent told us, the school "misses the great masses." One of the negative consequences is a growing perception that the only respectable course-taking pattern is an academic one, and that a certain stigma is attached to not being academically inclined. A student we interviewed paraphrased one of the vocational education teachers, who often tells her classes, in an apparent attempt to counter this stigma: "Vocational classes are for you. Don't think you're not important because you're taking voc ed."

Against this background, most of our respondents strongly supported Washington's one-year practical arts requirement (which encompasses the school's vocational offerings) as being good for college-bound as well as non-college-bound students. In addition, many believe that this requirement has boosted enrollments in non-academic classes and has allowed the school to retain courses and teachers it might not have been able to retain otherwise. The practical arts requirement has also caused the

students and staff to have a more positive view of the existence of vocational education and other practical arts courses.

Our respondents expressed divergent views about the quality of the school's vocational program and the students served by it. Several non-vocational teachers at Washington believe that the curriculum is excellent, but many others do not. One teacher told us that the vocational curriculum is "not seen as a bright spot." This teacher said that in these courses, "one can expect to be rewarded for minimal work." Others told us that "nobody fails" vocational courses unless they fail to attend. Finally, several vocational teachers complained that declining funding and increased emphasis on academics have eliminated virtually all but the beginning courses. These changes have meant that students can no longer learn job-specific skills at Washington but must acquire their training at the ROC or at a community college.

As at other schools, there is a general consensus at Washington that on-campus vocational education courses often serve as dumping grounds for students who have nowhere else to go. One vocational teacher said, "We're second-class citizens, and we know that and understand that, even though we don't like it." Another was equally blunt: "Whatever driftwood is around campus is put into your classes." Giving this perception a more positive cast, several teachers said they regard vocational courses as important because they are able to "save" students who discover that they excel in vocational areas rather than in academics. In addition, one teacher told us that vocational classes often provide more supportive, caring atmospheres than academic classes, and that counselors do not only "dump"; they place young people who need additional emotional support in these classes.

Student views of Washington's on-campus vocational courses are mixed. Several students described the courses they had taken as "a joke." One student said that he and his friends think of vocational courses as "teaching skills and not brain class[es]." Other students, however, described Washington's vocational courses in positive terms. One boy told us that most teachers and students do not stigmatize those who take more than the required number of vocational classes. Those who do attach a stigma to these classes are "the preps" and "the snots." Generally speaking, he believes, vocational classes are not just for non-college-bound students.

Student views of the ROC program were also mixed. One student referred to ROC as a place where "kids who aren't going to college—the waste cases—go." Another student planned to be an accountant, like her father, and wanted to take an ROC accounting course. Her father, who regretted that he had not attended college, refused to

let her do so, fearing that she would seek employment immediately following high school and would not attend college. He was not, according to the student, opposed to her goal of becoming an accountant but rather felt strongly, based on his own experience, that she would be a more successful accountant if she had a college education. Yet other students had more positive impressions of the ROC; one described ROC courses as "help[ing] you more for a career" than Washington's on-campus courses.

Perceptions of the Tracking System: Contradictions and Ambivalence

We found some sharp differences of opinion at Washington about the extent of "tracking" at the school and much ambivalence about whether tracking is appropriate for the student body. Despite evidence to the contrary (noted above), many at Washington believe that the academic curriculum has been "detracked"; others do not. Those who teach the labs or remedial classes clearly see these courses as being part of a tracking or ability-grouping system.

Our respondents also differ in their opinions about the advisability of "detracking." One counselor expressed the sentiments of many others when he stated his preference for a return to ability grouping. He told us, "We're on an equal kick now—that everyone should have equal opportunities." But, he added, this just "whitewashes everything," since we are not all equal. He said he wished the school was structured to help students succeed regardless of their ability. He argued that ability grouping can give students a better sense of self-worth, although he also said that those in the lower-track classes do feel stigmatized. He attempted to reconcile these contradictory views by saying that schools should not encourage students to hold unreasonable expectations. "Kids must learn what their limitations are." The opinions of one student from a general class echoed those of this counselor: When asked about ability grouping, she said, "It's better this way—it's not fair to smart people or those who can't keep up when kids are in too hard of a class."

Other teachers told us that they preferred the "detracked" English classes to those they had previously taught. Curiously, these teachers said that "this [detracking] had nothing to do with ethics or what was best for the kids—it was done because the same teachers kept getting the general classes and they were sick of it."

Some teachers characterized themselves as being "ambivalent" about tracking. One teacher said that "part of him" believed in equity, but the other part had to face the reality of the students in his remedial classes who have severe reading deficiencies and short attention spans, and who tend to "act out." Another teacher told us that she was

"philosophically against tracking," but she also worries about how her lab students would perform in a regular class without the individual attention, even though she admitted that there is "a little stigma" attached to the lab classes and she knows that most students would not choose to be in them.

Some teachers believe that the district is also ambivalent toward tracking. One noted that the district claims it has "detracked" English classes, yet it has used "wonderful nomenclature" for math and science courses to disguise a tracking system in these subjects. This teacher questions how the district can think that students who need to be grouped in math and science can learn well together in English.

Some Washington teachers and administrators, like those at Coolidge, said that the tracking or grouping system has resulted in the grouping of students by race and ethnicity, as well as the "clustering" of students who take vocational electives in lower-ability academic classes. One teacher of advanced courses commented, "I see few Hispanics in my classes and I wonder where are they? We don't talk about Hispanics in this school." Another teacher observed that many of the students in her remedial classes know each other from vocational and other low-level academic classes.

Perceptions of Counseling and Placement: Support Only Partly Eases Frustrations

Washington counselors, like counselors in other comprehensive high schools, play a key role in matching the curriculum with the students. Although Washington counselors express many of the same job frustrations as their counterparts at Coolidge and McKinley, as a group, they are significantly less disaffected. Why? Counselors at Washington, like the teachers, generally feel that school and district administrators are supportive and responsive to their problems and concerns. In addition, as noted above, the Washington student body is on average wealthier than that at either of our two other case study schools. Thus the counselors are not plagued by the more extreme economic and social problems that affect lower-income students at Coolidge and McKinley.

Yet the counselors at Washington do feel constrained and frustrated by the large number of students assigned to them and the severity of the social and behavioral problems many students have. The counselors fear that they are not adequately meeting the needs of all 400 of the students assigned to each of them.[7] One counselor told us that

[7]Students are distributed among the counselors alphabetically so each counselor follows the same students throughout their high school careers. In fall 1988, the two male counselors had the first half of the alphabet, and the female counselors had the last half.

she sees approximately 75 percent of her students during the semester, but "rarely" sees the remaining 25 percent. The 75 percent includes the "top students" and "the problems." Another counselor claims to have "meaningful" interaction with only about 50 students each year. He added that he never sees ninth graders unless they have a scheduling problem; then he spends most of that time fixing their programs, probably a maximum of 15 minutes with each of them.[8]

Counselors at Washington also perceive that the number of students with "problems" has increased in recent years. Social problems—including substance abuse, racial tension, family dysfunction, culture shock, and alienation—are increasingly common. In addition, counselors are concerned about the Asian students, whom they see as being under extreme pressure to perform well academically.[9] Some Asian students have been sent from Taiwan to get an American education, and parents pay for them to live with individuals or families, often in crowded conditions. Many of these students experience emotional difficulties coping with a strange culture, an unfamiliar language, and the distance from their families.

Because of the large number of students for whom they are responsible, the severity of their students' problems, and the many demands on their time, some counselors at Washington feel that they have become the "scapegoats" for the intractable problems in the student placement and guidance process. "We get blamed for everything," one counselor told us.

More significantly, however, these pressures have produced a guidance and placement structure in which the students themselves appear to have the responsibility of identifying curricular opportunities and signaling counselors and teachers of their interests and needs. "[Washington] is a good school with a lot of caring teachers," one of our respondents told us, "but sometimes a kid just gets lost in the system, has the capability but needs dusting off."

Student views of Washington's guidance and placement system, while more positive than those we heard at Coolidge, corroborate many of the counselors' frustrations. Several students complained that it is difficult to make appointments with their counselors and that when they did so, their counselors seemed uninterested in them.

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[8]As at Coolidge and McKinley, Washington counselors believe that they must devote far too much of their time to schedule-related activities. Each reported that they spent most of the first three weeks of each semester doing little more than making changes in student schedules.

[9]One Asian student told us that because his cousin attends MIT, his parents expect that he will do so as well. Even though he has earned all A's at Washington, he said that his parents still push him harder and compare his SAT scores with those earned by the children of their friends.

One girl said that when she saw her counselor for her annual meeting, she expected to be in his office for "at least five minutes," but instead it was just, "hello, okay, bye." On the other hand, several students praised their counselors. One said that because of Washington's alpha cohort assignment system, her counselor had been assigned her older siblings and "knew what to do to help her." Several others had very positive views of one particular counselor because, they said, "he really counsels." He reviews each student's transcript prior to meeting with him or her and offers sound advice about courses and college. An Asian immigrant student said that when he first came to Washington, this counselor gave him his home phone number and said to call him anytime. The student said that this counselor made him feel like "his son or daughter."

CURRICULUM ORIGINS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Washington's academic and vocational curriculum is the product of several trends and developments that have moved it in much the same direction as has occurred at other schools. However, Washington—along with its district administration—has responded in some unique ways.

We heard much less at Washington than at Coolidge about prospective curricular changes. Nonetheless, the negative reaction toward the district's desire for a standardized curriculum is widespread. Moreover, we found a broadly held perception that if increasingly stringent and inflexible academic requirements continue, "before long there will not even be a [vocational] program for those who need it." The at-risk students cannot survive if there is no vocational training. Those most involved in Washington's vocational program express frustration and sadness over the virtual gutting of the program. One administrator recounted that the graphic arts class, metal class and machine shop were all shut down in one year. Yet, the prospect of vocational education being discontinued at Washington High seems to be much farther in the future than it does at Coolidge.

The Decline of Vocational Programs Due to Changing Enrollment

Declining enrollment has affected the vocational and practical arts curriculum at Washington much more severely than the academic curriculum. Fifteen years ago, the business department had seven teachers. Ten years ago, the department was cut to five; three years ago, it fell to two; and it currently consists of one-and-a-half FTE. Moreover, as enrollment has declined, the percentage of Asian students—perceived to be the most academically talented of Washington's students—has simultaneously risen. Because of

the prevailing belief that vocational education is not needed by the academically talented, the retrenchment of Washington's vocational curriculum has not generated the degree of concern or discussion that similar cutbacks have triggered at Coolidge. (Coolidge has experienced an influx of Hispanic students, many of whom are perceived to be academically "at-risk" and non-college-bound.) One administrator recalled that because of Washington's academic emphasis, "no one complained" when these cuts in vocational classes occurred. But "can you imagine the hue and cry," he asked, "if a GATE [Gifted and Talented Education] class was cut?"

The Effect of State Reforms on the Range of Vocational Offerings

Increased graduation requirements, the imposition of a proficiency test, and the influence of state model curricula have, in recent years, narrowed the range of curriculum choices for Washington students. Like demographic changes, this process has had a particularly adverse effect on vocational offerings and enrollments.

As at Coolidge, increases in the number of academic courses required for graduation have meant that non-college-bound Washington students have less room in their schedule for vocational and practical courses. In addition, state legislation mandating that all students pass a proficiency test for graduation has led the district to create remedial lab courses for students who fail the test, further decreasing the time they have to take vocational courses.

Interviews with teachers and administrators also suggest that the model state curricula have influenced Washington more than they have Coolidge. The district in which Washington sits has put a premium on standardization of the curriculum and resources across its four high schools. Consequently, adherence to the model curricula can be effectively used as part of the teacher evaluation process.

In response to these developments, the district vocational coordinator, along with some vocational teachers, tried unsuccessfully to bolster interest in vocational and practical arts by developing vocational courses that would fulfill academic requirements for graduation. At Washington, these courses included interior design, which was intended to fulfill Washington's fine arts requirement; an advanced accounting course, which would have counted toward the school's math requirement; and an "economics for living" course, intended to fulfill part of the social studies requirement. Yet, after a long struggle, the school board defeated these proposals largely because of, according to the vocational coordinator, a fear that these courses would dilute the academic rigor of Washington's curriculum.

State and Federal Support for Existing Vocational Programs

One district administrator told us that allocation of Perkins funds does not affect the courses the Washington district offers. Rather, where possible, the district uses Perkins and other funding to support programs that the district had, for other reasons, decided to maintain (see below). For example, to qualify for Perkins funds, teachers must have a special credential. Consequently, Perkins funds support the wood shop courses at two schools (not at Washington) in the district because the wood shop teachers at those schools already have the required credential. At Washington, the auto teacher has that credential, so he receives Perkins support for his class. While special funding may not affect the range of courses offered at Washington, the school and district have been successful in securing additional funding to provide equipment for existing courses.

Community Pressure for Academics

Community, and particularly parent, pressure has been exercised almost entirely on issues pertaining to Washington's academic offerings. Pressure from parents was in part responsible for the school board's decision not to approve certain vocational courses for academic credit. Parents have also pushed the district and board to offer additional academic honors and AP courses. The existence of such courses at one school has pressured the district to offer the same courses at the other schools. And the extra grade point that students can earn for these courses has forced schools and the district not to drop the courses, even when enrollments sag. Moreover, several respondents report that the district and board are feeling particular pressure from Asian parents, who reportedly believe strongly in academics to the virtual exclusion of all else. These parents complain that the "schools aren't hard enough," and they do not want their children in sports, special education programs, or vocational classes.

District Policies and Traditions

District traditions and policy have exerted a major influence on the curriculum at Washington. Two beliefs appear to drive these district efforts. One is that high school should nurture the well-rounded student. In this regard, it has always been a district policy, we were told, to promote the comprehensive high school in order to produce a "balanced" student. The other belief is that standardization is the best means to accomplish this goal districtwide. Washington High teachers spoke frankly with us about what they view as the strengths and weaknesses of these strong district influences on the curriculum.

The one-year practical arts requirement stands out as the largest, single positive outcome of district curriculum actions. Three years ago, district personnel, especially those involved with vocational education, worked hard to introduce the one-year practical arts requirement into the curriculum. This requirement has given a modest boost to what might otherwise be received as even more "marginal" classes. Some among the vocational education faculty consider the district very supportive of their programs. However, while the district's vocational curriculum originally emerged from a perception of local labor-market needs, some of the courses—such as wood shop—have been preserved, we were told, because of the availability of good teachers and the district's long tradition of offering them.

The district's ability to win funding in competitive grant competitions has also strongly influenced the quality of Washington course offerings. Recently, for example, the district won all but two of the competitive grants awarded to schools in the county. The state granted the district $500,000 to supplement a $1,000,000 allocation for computers from the school board the previous year.

Washington teachers with whom we spoke view the district's push toward standardization as both beneficial and risky. One benefit is the articulation between middle school and high school course content and skill development. The district also views standardization as a means by which it can more effectively measure student progress across all high schools, evaluate teachers, and perhaps obtain some money for textbooks.

However, most Washington teachers with whom we spoke believe that standardization of the curriculum—particularly when coupled with moves to "detrack" English and social studies—has had negative consequences. They believe that standardization constrains their flexibility in responding to student needs and interests.

Many teachers argued that they, not the district staff, are the experts, the professionals who really understand student needs. For example, the move to standardize math and science texts among the four schools in the district angered some teachers who value the autonomy they have to choose books to fit their students and teaching style.

Some of our respondents also criticized the district for its inattention to the consequences for teachers of the push toward standardization. Recognizing that textbook uniformity is supposed to save money, teachers insisted that there is no saving if their preparation time is taken into account. Moreover, the district's unwillingness to respond to teacher complaints about increased preparation time or to make good on its promise to

lead preparation sessions has produced a "morale problem" among math and science teachers.

Other teachers resent their loss of control over course content as a result of standardization. Computer courses, for example, are a relatively new offering at Washington. Their form and content, generally speaking, are in the hands of one enthusiastic teacher. He and a colleague at another district high school have strongly resisted moves to standardize the curriculum; they are trying to "hang onto the curriculum." They worry that the course will reach the lowest common denominator and that standardization will allow other teachers, especially those whose courses in other departments have been eliminated, to take over these classes.

Some teachers voiced opposition to standardization because the "decisionmaking occurred at the district level behind closed doors" and reached them in the form of mandates. Several teachers complained about their inability to contribute to the formation of district curriculum policies. The district has established the 4 X 4 (four by four) committee, which consists of the department chairs and one administrator from each school, to participate in curriculum decisions. Yet, some teachers do not believe that this committee represents their views or concerns.

A number of teachers view the (district's) detracking policy as a top-down mandate, one that is, in some cases, in direct conflict with what they want. A math teacher told us that she opposes district proposals currently under discussion to detrack math because she believes that the detracked classes will be geared for college-bound students. Since "not every kid is cut out for college," many will fail.

The Future: Fear of Decreased Variety and Flexibility

Declining enrollment and Washington's strong academic emphasis have been the most powerful influences on the school's curriculum in recent years. Their impact has been felt most dramatically in the vocational arts courses, where severe cutbacks have occurred in the number and range of courses and in the staff. These influences may also be harbingers of future trends. As one district administrator said, "Before long, there will not even be programs for those who need [them]"—the non-college-bound. "The at-risk students can't survive if there is no vocational training."

One school administrator charged with oversight for vocational education believes that Washington could reverse this trend if it strengthened the more general vocational courses that students take in the earlier grades. Students who took these courses, he believes, would be more likely to take more specialized and occupationally specific

vocational courses in the eleventh and twelfth grades. Currently, Washington is making no effort to develop such a demand for vocational education.[10]

Washington teachers are resisting what they perceive as increasing district control and decreasing teacher autonomy in both the academic and vocational curricula. However, most of them feel that they are fighting a losing battle. They regret this direction, since they believe that it is more difficult for the district than for individual schools and teachers to respond quickly and creatively to student needs and interests.

WHO GETS WHAT AND WHY AT WASHINGTON: COUNSELING AND CURRICULUM PATTERNS

Washington High School's tradition of developing a well-rounded student by emphasizing both academic achievement and instruction in the practical arts appears to be in jeopardy. The consensus of those with whom we spoke is that the school's curriculum has, in recent years, become increasingly inflexible and academic. We saw some of the same curricular influences at Washington that we observed at Coolidge—state graduation requirements and pressure from the parents of college-bound students. Other factors, such as the district's efforts to standardize the curriculum across its four high schools, are unique to Washington.

However, the effect of this push toward an increasingly inflexible, academic curriculum for all students has produced at Washington much the same result as at Coolidge, in terms of the availability of vocational instruction and the role and status of the vocational curriculum. Washington is the only one of our three case study schools to require all students to take practical arts courses. Yet in recent years, declining enrollment, declining school funding, and increasing academic requirements have resulted in the elimination of many of these courses and the teachers who teach them. Entire areas of instruction, such as metal shop and graphic arts, have been dropped from the Washington curriculum, as have most of the advanced classes in the vocational subjects that are still taught. The survival of those vocational classes that remain is dependent on the ability of teachers to maintain minimum enrollments and keep their students interested. These vestiges of Washington's former vocational program are

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[10]However, the district vocational education administrator has adopted a related strategy: He is trying to generate interest in vocational courses at the middle school level through an experimental technology course that he is piloting with a seventh grade shop teacher. The course stresses problem-solving and incorporates projects that require students to develop laboratory experiments and test theories. The administrator believes that if this effort expands, it may generate greater interest in vocational education at the high school level in the future.

generally not seen as "a bright spot" in the school's curriculum. As at Coolidge, Washington's vocational courses are often viewed as a "dumping ground" for students with academic and behavioral problems. Exacerbating this problem has been the successful effort of many parents to have computer science—a mathematics course—qualify as a practical arts course for high-achieving students.

The current status of Washington's vocational and academic curriculum prompted many of our respondents to express concern for the non-college-bound students. There is a widespread perception that the school is no longer "meeting the needs" of these students who will neither directly enter college nor leave high school prepared to enter a specific occupation. But as at our other two schools, the attitudes of many Washington staff, and the constraints under which the school's guidance counselors and teachers operate, combine to limit the help this group of students receives. As a result, these students are left to find their own path through the school's curriculum—an unlikely approach for acquiring a constructive mix of academic and vocational preparation.

Washington counselors, like their counterparts at Coolidge and McKinley, are responsible for huge cohorts of students, and all reported that they had time to deal meaningfully with only a few of them. In addition, while we found that the attitudes of Washington counselors and teachers toward their students are significantly less deterministic than at Coolidge, their perceptions of students' abilities and motivation nonetheless effectively limit many students' access to curriculum. Our respondents repeatedly told us that Washington students, particularly Anglo students, do little more than is required to "get by," and that students tend to place themselves where they will "succeed." Teachers and counselors are reluctant to push students into more advanced levels or classes, believing that the students are "scared" or "unmotivated." As a result, the placement system is fairly rigid, with little movement between tracks. Those students who are "at risk," those with poor to middling academic skills, those who are undecided about their post-graduation plans, and those who are shy or reluctant to seek curriculum or career guidance tend to "fall through the cracks" of Washington's curriculum and placement structure.

IV. McKINLEY HIGH SCHOOL: COPING WITH CHAOS

McKINLEY AND ITS COMMUNITY

McKinley High School was founded in 1905 to serve what was then a small coastal farming community adjacent to a growing city. It now sits in the midst of a primarily black and Hispanic neighborhood, part of a large, continuous metropolitan area.

Like the other schools in our study, McKinley has experienced considerable change in its student population over the past 25 years. One counselor remembers McKinley as being one of the best schools in the area, where affluent families, many Jewish, sent their children. She described these students as being active in clubs, highly motivated, and college-bound. This same counselor described the racial tension created by the enrollment of McKinley High's first black student. Then, during the 1970s, the school's enrollment became almost enirely black, as whites fled to suburban schools. In more recent years there has been an influx of Hispanic students. McKinley now serves approximately 2,100 students, of whom 58 percent are black, 38 percent are Hispanic, and 3 percent are a mix of Asian, Pacific Islander, Native American, and Anglo.

Students at McKinley come from fairly diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. Within McKinley's district, middle- to upper-middle-class black neighborhoods stand adjacent to lower-middle-class and poor neighborhoods. However, notwithstanding the economic diversity of the district, many of McKinley's students come from poor families. The 1987-88 state school assessment report shows that 16.6 percent of McKinley students qualify for AFDC, a much larger percentage than at Coolidge or Washington. Yet many staff teachers told us that although they know their students span a wide economic range, they are not able to differentiate well between affluent and poor students. And the McKinley staff believe that because of peer pressure to keep their status hidden, many students are reluctant to take advantage of the reduced and free lunches provided in the school cafeteria.

This ethnic and economic mix has produced some racial tension and, in recent years, gang activity on campus. Interracial and gang violence, while generally contained, does sometimes erupt at the school, according to the teachers. The presence of security guards (who were not in evidence at Washington or Coolidge) attests to concern about possible incidents. In fact, during our study, a drive-by shooting did occur in front of the school.

At present, however, the principal and some staff members report that there is more interracial tension on campus among teachers and staff than among students. According to the principal, "racist whites and racist blacks" are creating problems for the school. However, racial problems among the staff seem secondary to a larger morale problem which, as described below, exerts a major influence on all aspects of the school's operation and curriculum.

Many at McKinley are disappointed with the current low level of parental and community involvement. A small group of 25 to 30 parents, nearly all black, attend PTSA meetings. The principal voiced particular disappointment; he claimed that in his previous district, he was able to "call a meeting and have 2,000 parents show up." He is especially uncomfortable with the lack of parental outcry over failing grades—one semester he complained that even though teachers handed out "a total of 500 F's and 600 D's . . . there were no complaining parents." He now sometimes requires parents to pick up 5-week progress reports for their children in order to ensure they are aware of the children's progress, and, he hopes, to stimulate greater involvement with the school.

School and district staff attribute the lack of parental involvement to the flight of many of the more affluent students from McKinley to schools in neighboring districts or to local private schools. The district staff is very concerned with encouraging the return of these relatively affluent students to the district schools. Since these students generally leave the district schools sometime after elementary school, current efforts are focused on creating a positive image of the high school for younger children and their parents.

McKINLEY AS AN ORGANIZATION

District Leadership: An Absence of Cohesion and Continuity

The McKinley school district has two comprehensive high schools and one continuation high school which draws 160 students from the "regular" high schools. According to McKinley's curriculum administrator, the three schools do not maintain parallel course offerings, and they have considerable discretion in how they translate the district requirements into course offerings. This discretion has been facilitated by frequent personnel turnover. District leadership in curriculum has shifted frequently over the past few years, marked by overnight "retirements" and interim administrators taking charge of large portions of district governance—creating an "incidental" reorganization.

One highly placed district administrator told us that poor communication and a lack of trust have resulted in low morale and resistance to change. At the school level, there is little positive reinforcement for faculty members and a resulting lack of

involvement on their part. Administrators told us that the district "lacks stability" and is generally "not responding to school site administrators." In general, school personnel are forced to do a balancing act. On one hand, they are supposed to be part of a team; but on the other hand, there is no district support for a team effort—partly because the district itself does not function as a team.

During the 1988-89 school year, the school board hired a new superintendent. Because he was a well-known educator with a record of past success and a "take-charge" style, district and school staff looked to him to resolve district and school conflict and to put an end to ineffectiveness. We sensed disappointment from school and district staff that as the school year proceeded, they had not been informed of the superintendent's plans for the future, and that expected changes had not occurred.[1]

School Administration and Staff: Warring Factions

The current McKinley principal, a black man in his mid-sixties, has headed the school for five years. He was recruited from a neighboring district and had a reputation for having successfully controlled gang activity—gangs were a serious problem at McKinley at the time he joined the school. School staff generally agree that he has contributed to creating a safer campus.

The administrative staff also includes an assistant principal for curriculum, an assistant principal for student services, a dean responsible for discipline, a coordinator who divides her efforts between a state-sponsored school improvement program and the school work experience program, and a five-member counseling staff. These roles suggest a clear-cut division of accountability; however, the principal stands as the primary and single decisionmaker for all levels of school business.

The principal's leadership style is authoritarian, unpredictable, and explosive. While his intent is to improve the quality of education (in addition to his apparently successful campaign to rid the campus of overt gang activity and graffiti), he has a markedly debilitating effect on those who work with him. Many staff members endorse the principal's goals, but they are demoralized and angered by his personal and administrative style. A majority of those with whom we spoke reported that when something or someone angers or frustrates him, he often publicly upbraids those involved and sometimes those who just happen to be nearby.

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[1]Parents of students in the district were also disappointed by the new superintendent's well-publicized absences at scheduled PTA meetings.

One result of this behavior is that the staff, wary of further humiliation, refer all matters—large as well as small—to him for his specific approval. Staff told us that in the rare instances when they take action or make decisions based on his guidelines or actions, they still fear that he will criticize them. Many contend that the principal's rules change too frequently and seem too arbitrary for them to make decisions they believe are likely to meet his approval. The principal's control extends even to teachers' everyday routines. He has established procedures to screen their requests for materials and texts, their lesson plans, and their homework assignments. He personally xeroxes all assignments and supplementary materials that teachers want to use because he is concerned that teachers rely too much on instruction by worksheets. He even requires them to turn in their keys immediately after school each day.

One counselor put it this way, "This school lacks planning. It is like Peter Pan. 'What are we going to do today?' says Wendy to Peter Pan." The lack of organization, she said, begins with the principal, but it filters down to the rest of the school. She told us that the teachers can now get away with being slipshod and doing the minimum required, since initiative is not rewarded. Another staff member stated the problem more bluntly when he gave his view of how to improve McKinley: "I'd get rid of the principal, since his methods are no longer effective." He said that the principal had been brought in to clean up the school, but that he has torn it apart—that the staff despises him because they are browbeaten by him. Many teachers confirmed that the effect has gone beyond bad morale. One said the result has been an "I don't care" attitude—"we just try to survive."

At the same time, the principal expresses extreme frustration with the faculty, saying, "I hate to admit it, but I don't think I can go out and find 5 good teachers out of the 78 on campus." He feels that many of the teachers have been at McKinley too long and therefore are resistant to his "reforms." He expresses many of his complaints about teachers, administrative staff, counselors, students, and parents quite publicly. District and school staff described (and we witnessed) his frequent and disruptive loudspeaker announcements, in which teachers, students, and counselors alike are "raked over the coals."

The extreme polarization between McKinley's principal and his staff has taken its toll on the school's vitality and on its academic and vocational curriculum. While some of the staff who have been at McKinley for a number of years remain dedicated and hard-working, other demoralized, "gun-shy" veterans seem to be waiting for the principal's

retirement—or their own. Many newer teachers told us that they are looking for work elsewhere; a number of teachers have taken disability leave or have quit in midyear.

McKINLEY AS AN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION

McKinley's Mission: Higher Education is for Everyone

McKinley High School's formal mission statement is articulated as "to provide opportunities for all students to be successful in their educational pursuits. The school is to assist all students in obtaining needed entry level skills for the post-secondary activity of their choice." However, this formal mission is overshadowed by the constant statements of the principal, assistant principal, and college counselor that college is what really counts.

To help create a climate that will support high academic achievement, the principal established 14 specific goals for the 1988-89 school year. They include reducing teacher absenteeism and the number of failing grades teachers give out, reducing student absenteeism, improving reading and writing skills, improving instruction through better lesson plans/objectives and goals, and more clearly differentiating the curriculum offered in honors and AP courses from more general courses in the same subjects.

McKinley Views Its Students and Its Work: The Academic Fantasy

McKinley struggles to maintain its image as a school that prepares students for college, despite the serious demands placed on it by changed demographics, an ongoing (but greatly reduced) problem with gang activity, and the needs of a limited-English-speaking population that is increasing in both number and diversity.

McKinley High students ranked in the 5th percentile in the state on their verbal scores and the 4th percentile in math. Students also scored quite low on the State Assessment Program test administered annually to seniors—statewide they ranked in the 9th percentile in reading and the 4th percentile in math. Moreover, McKinley compares unfavorably with other schools in the state with similar demographic characteristics. State data indicate that McKinley students rank between the 1st and 4th percentiles within the group of comparable schools in the state.

According to school records, 36 percent of the 1988 class enrolled in a four-year college or university and 43 percent enrolled in a junior college. Just under 40 percent of the seniors in the 1987 class took the SAT; their mean scores were low relative to those of other students in the state.

McKinley's high attrition rate further reduces its college entrance rate. Based on the sizes of the 1987-88 ninth and twelfth grade classes, we estimate the school's four-year attrition rate to be 55 percent.[2] That means that the reported senior achievement scores and college attendance rates actually reflect the attainments of approximately 45 percent of the class that began as freshmen. Consequently, the 36 percent of seniors the school reported as entering four-year colleges represents only 8 percent of the entering freshman class; similarly, its two-year college enrollment rate is 10 percent.[3]

Obviously, McKinley is constrained in its efforts to promote student achievement and college attendance by the many social problems its students face. One counselor estimated that the majority of students at McKinley today come from families in which they are the first generation of high school graduates. This counselor believes that for these students, high school graduation is an achievement to be followed by immediate entry into the work force. For many such students the opportunity to seek higher education must be delayed until their economic situation is stronger. Furthermore, the mobility rate at McKinley is characterized by staff as being "very high." According to information submitted in the most recent accreditation report, just under 600 students transferred out of McKinley during the 1986-87 school year. One counselor estimated that only 25 percent of the students in her twelfth grade class had started at McKinley in the ninth grade.

THE OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURE: THE CURRICULUM

The principal's focus on maintaining the image of a strong college-preparatory school has a powerful effect on the content of the curriculum and the range of opportunities offered to McKinley's students. We see the consequences in the graduation requirements, the on-campus offerings, and the tracking and grouping system at McKinley, as well as in the daily social dynamics.

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[2]This comparison is made possible by the stability of the size of the total student population over the past several years and the steadily declining numbers of students in each successive grade—in 1987-88, there were 757 ninth graders, 682 tenth graders, 476 eleventh graders, and 344 seniors.

[3]State data on McKinley students' enrollment in state-supported colleges reveal an even lower rate of college entrance. When adjusted for attrition, only 3 percent of McKinley's potential seniors enrolled in state-supported four-year institutions, and only 9 percent enrolled in community colleges. These figures do not include the 55 McKinley students in the class of 1988 who planned to enroll in private or out-of-state historically black colleges.

On-Campus Course Offerings: The Press Toward College

There is no readily available description of McKinley's course offerings (and thus no course manual for students)—further evidence of the extent of disorganization in the school and the district. The only printed record of existing curriculum is the district's 1978-79 Curriculum Guide Resource Manuals, with 1986 updates in a few subjects. We have reconstructed the curriculum by using these guides, along with teacher schedules, the responses to our interview questions, and the packet of registration materials given to students.

In fall 1988, the McKinley curriculum included a total of 408.9 course sections: 58 percent in core academic courses, 15 percent in vocational education (a higher percentage than at either Coolidge or Washington), and 26 percent in other areas such as foreign languages, visual and performing arts, and special education. Vocational offerings included business, computer courses, home economics, and industrial arts. In addition, the county ROC sponsors two 2-hour vocational courses on campus at McKinley: automotives and printing. The instructors for these courses are supervised by the county rather than the McKinley administration.

The emphasis on academics at McKinley is reflected in the school's graduation requirements. McKinley requires 230 credits for graduation, as compared with 220 credits in our other two schools. These requirements are consistent with the admissions requirements for the most elite tier of the state university system, and they surpass the state graduation requirements. McKinley requires four years of English, while the state requires three; McKinley requires three years of math, to the state's two. Only in science (two years) and social studies (three years) are the state and school requirements the same. Like Coolidge, McKinley does not require students to take any vocational education courses for graduation.

McKinley's curriculum also includes two special programs. The Technical Instruction Program (TIP), a joint effort between the district and a large commercial firm, begins in junior high school for students who are considered by their teachers to have the potential to qualify for an engineering career. The program emphasizes certain disciplines, e.g., math, science, and drafting. It is strong at the middle school level, but, according to counselors, when the TIP students reach high school, they become concerned (as do other college-bound students) about accumulating a broad range of college-preparatory credits, and many drift away from the program.

McKinley also offers the Partnership Academy Program for tenth and eleventh grade students who are at risk of dropping out. This is a special pull-out program, funded

by the state and community businesses, which operates as "a school within a school." During the 1988-89 school year, 48 students participated. The tenth graders take English, math, and a computer course; eleventh graders take English, math, and word processing. (The Academy's English teacher enthusiastically told us that many of her students had read their first book this year.)

Off-Campus Course Offerings: High-Quality Vocational Education for a Few

The principal estimated that during the fall 1988 semester, there were about 100 McKinley students (about 5 percent of the student body) involved in ROC courses off campus. These students must conform to the ROC general admissions criteria—they must be enrolled as juniors or seniors or be at least 16 years old.

Work Experience: Uneven Vocational Education Experiences for a Handful

McKinley's work experience program is only for students who have already found jobs and have been working for a minimum of two weeks. They must maintain a C average, attend a weekly on-campus class about preparation for employment and employers' expectations, turn in copies of their time sheets, and pass an exam on the material covered at the end of the semester. The state has established a cap on student enrollment in work experience of 25 students per class. At McKinley, they get around the cap by offering a third, nonexistent, section of the class after school. This way, an average class size of less than 25 is maintained, and an estimated 150 students (75 per semester) can take part in a given year.

The high school improvement program (HIP), developed with the sponsorship of a local major corporation, also offers work experience, but it is administered in a very different fashion. During the second semester of their senior year, 10 to 20 students spend their afternoons working at the company. They are assigned to mentors and given on-the-job training in different departments, e.g., data processing, stock, and machine shop. In the process, they earn 10 credits, the equivalent of two hours of class. According to McKinley's principal, HIP targets the "good, average student" with an interest in work experience and a desire for job placement with the corporation following graduation. Students are advised to try this program, since, according to the work experience coordinator, "a well-paying job of $30,000 to $40,000 a year is possible without a college education."[4]

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[4]In addition to these two work experience programs, McKinley also has a work ability program administered by the district for special education students.

The Opportunity Structure: "Untracked" but Differentiated

Every administrator, counselor, and teacher with whom we spoke insisted that there is no tracking in the school. Many told us that "tracking is illegal." McKinley does have a flatter, less hierarchical system of course offerings than does Coolidge, but it does indeed group students by ability.

Because McKinley aims to provide an opportunity for all students to meet college admissions requirements, virtually all of the English and social studies courses meet university admissions requirements. But there is still differentiation in those subjects between the AP and honors classes and regular classes (as well as ESL).

In math and science, McKinley has different courses at different "levels," clearly designated by different course names. There are eight math options for students entering ninth grade: proficiency math; high school math; math A; math B; algebra 1; geometry (for those rare students who have already taken algebra in middle school); and two TIP courses, one in algebra and one in geometry. All of these courses can be taken by students in other grades as well. The science department offers six courses for ninth graders. Incoming freshmen can take one of the following: health/ecology (a general science not applicable to college admissions); life science (also a general science); physical science; ESL science; TIP biology; or honors biology. In later grades, students may take another of these introductory courses or move into the sequence of college-preparatory courses—biology (normally tenth grade), chemistry (eleventh grade), and physics (eleventh or twelfth grade). Special AP classes in biology and chemistry round out the program.

ALLOCATING OPPORTUNITY: COUNSELING AND PLACEMENT

Unlike the alphabetic assignments used at Coolidge and Washington, McKinley's counselors pick up an incoming ninth grade class and advise that class for four years. Washington's counselors were quick to point out the benefits of this assignment process: The counselor and students build a strong relationship over the four years; "they get to know us," "we get to know them," and "they get to trust us." The four counselors have caseloads of between 350 and 700 students each.[5] A fifth counselor has no assigned advisees, but has responsibility for providing college counseling for all students who seek it.

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[5]As mentioned earlier, because of the high attrition rate, the classes get considerably smaller as they progress toward graduation.

Advising and Placement: Familiar Routines

The counselor for the class entering high school in the fall arranges an orientation assembly the preceding spring in each of the three feeder schools. A group of people from McKinley, including students who are active in sports and extracurricular activities, presents a general introduction to high school life. The main purpose of these assemblies is to get incoming freshmen interested in McKinley and "pumped up." This is not the time, we were told, for detailed information about enrollments, graduation and college entrance requirements, or career plans. Prospective enrollees are given student data sheets and lists of ninth grade courses to fill out with their parents.

During a second spring visit, the counselor, sometimes with the aid of other high school counselors, meets with smaller groups of eighth graders to help them complete their fall schedules. The counselor is guided in this process by achievement test scores and middle school teachers' course recommendation forms. Parents are expected to "sign off" on their child's program, although, according to counselors, many fail to do so. Counselors follow similar processes in enrolling students from tenth through twelfth grade. After the freshman year, placement in different levels and courses is determined primarily by grades. In general, if a student has performed at a C level or better, he or she can move to the next course in a department sequence. However, teachers can also recommend student placement in core subjects for the subsequent year. Unlike students at Coolidge and Washington, McKinley students do not have the option of choosing a particular teacher or section of a class.

Track Mobility: Easier to Move Down Than Up

Cross-track mobility seems to be rare at McKinley. But when such movement does occur, it is usually in math or science placement, since these departments have the most stratified programs, and the direction of that movement is generally downward rather than upward.

If a teacher requests a track change for a student, the counselors usually approve it. But several teachers told us that the burden of responsibility for moving up generally rests on the students. Even when a student does request a change, counselors first try to identify whether the request stems from an erroneous placement—given the student's prior record. The change is more likely to be made if it is requested because of erroneous placement than if it stems from a student's wish to try a more difficult class.

When parents request changes, their wishes are usually honored. However, if the staff believes an upward move is inappropriate for the student, the parent is usually

required to sign a statement indicating that the placement is being made against the counselor's or teacher's recommendation.[6]

Vocational and Career Guidance

McKinley's counselors do little career counseling. The principal said he "took out the career placement center" in the interest of focusing more attention on college preparation. No career planning is included in the formal registration process, yet counselors told us that within the severe time constraints under which they operate, they do try to discuss career options informally with students.

Like other high schools, McKinley receives special funds for tenth graders who are perceived to be at risk of school failure. The tenth grade counselor uses these special funds to arrange field trips and visiting lectures from community business people. McKinley's "Project Graduation" gives all tenth graders a career survey and career exploration information. The tenth grade counselor said there was no time, however, to follow up on the survey.

HOW McKINLEY VIEWS ITS CURRICULUM AND STUDENTS' OPPORTUNITIES

As at Coolidge and Washington, McKinley teachers and staff told us of their concern that the school's curriculum has diminished in scope and variety. Many veteran McKinley teachers reflected on previous years, when the curriculum was more enriched with electives. These teachers see today's curriculum as driven by the basics spelled out in the state model curriculum framework and university admissions requirements. At our other two schools, these statewide pressures have been coupled with decreasing enrollments, resulting in drastic cuts in their elective and non-academic programs. What distinguishes McKinley is not only the fact that the total size of the student body has remained stable, but also the apparently intentional narrowing of the curriculum that stems from the school's goal of preparing all students for college.[7]

The Academic Curriculum: Poor Fit, Poor Execution

Although there is some consensus at McKinley that the formal curriculum is intended to serve the college-bound student, there is considerable dispute about the

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[6]We could not interview students at McKinley, so we are unable to compare their views on track mobility with those of faculty and staff.

[7]Again, because we could not interview students at McKinley, we cannot compare their views on the vocational and academic curriculum with those of other school and district respondents.

quality of the courses and whether college admission should indeed be McKinley's goal. We heard from many respondents that the academic classes were rigorous in name only. The AP English class, we were told, was taught without the specific textbooks mandated by the program that sets the AP curriculum. Moreover, faculty and staff perceptions that the curriculum has been watered down extended to academic courses more generally. One teacher reported that geometry at McKinley was taught without using proofs, despite the fact that it is a course about deductive reasoning. A district specialist observed that, because McKinley's courses are less rigorous than those at other schools, many McKinley students who do get into college soon drop out because they do not have the skills necessary for success. This perception was echoed by some of the counselors as well.

Many at McKinley asserted that there was considerable lack of fit between the curriculum and the students—that many students are not well served by the predominantly college-preparatory curriculum and the rigorous graduation requirements. According to the math department chair, for example, the graduation requirement of three years of math poses serious problems for many McKinley students, some of whom have to repeat several math courses in summer school. This pattern also has implications for student success in science courses, as students' performance and success in science are very dependent on their facility with math.

Some counselors and teachers also expressed concern that the cultural underpinnings of the school's curriculum are too narrow. Considerable attention is paid to activities targeted to black students, but much less is done for the Hispanic and Asian students—even though Hispanics constitute almost 40 percent of the student body. Several English and social studies teachers told of their (frequently frustrated) efforts to incorporate literature written by Hispanic or Asian authors. The English chair said she had requested a particular novel by a Hispanic author, then waited for a long time, only to learn that the assistant principal had failed to order that book and was reluctant to do so. In a more positive case, one civics teacher reported that his students were reading Octavio Paz and Contreras, and that in doing so, the Hispanic students were "coming alive."

Vocational education teachers at all our schools spoke about the need for new equipment. At McKinley, the academic teachers also expressed a need for basic supplies. Teachers in all subjects remarked on the lack of course materials and texts. An ESL class of 34 was taught with only 10 available books. Teaching aids and supplies that are considered standard in many schools are hard to find at McKinley. One teacher said he longed for an overhead projector. Because departments no longer have separate budgets,

teachers have to appeal to the principal individually for new supplies. One teacher said he had to "ask and ask and ask." This procedure, we were told, discourages many teachers from trying.

The Vocational Curriculum: Second-Class Status

Some staff members reported that McKinley's vocational program is generally weak. When asked how she would rate the different departments, one counselor said she would give vocational education a D, based on "lack of equipment," "lack of materials," and "poor teacher motivation." One teacher, speaking more graphically than we first realized, said, "Wood shop is dead." (We learned that the woodshop had been closed for the fall 1988 semester because the woodshop teacher was on sick leave, and no substitute had been hired; the students were placed in a study hall, for which they received a semester's credit.) Probably most telling was the difficulty many teachers had in responding to questions about the vocational program on campus. It "stands kind of in the background," explained an academic teacher. The automotives teacher echoed this image, gesturing broadly to illustrate that the shop was physically distanced from the campus. The discontinuation of the career center at McKinley has, in the view of some staff, further diminished the stature of the school's vocational programs.

As with the academic program, some vocational courses suffer from a lack of modern equipment. For example, 20 students were enrolled in a computer class with only 10 computers. The automotives teacher said that the shop he uses is "antiquated" and that it takes a long time to get new machines or tools. Another staff member told us that he recommends that students who are seriously interested in auto mechanics enroll in ROC programs (as opposed to the school-sponsored auto shop), because the ROC equipment is modern. A business teacher, on the other hand, reported that in the past three years she finally has gotten up-to-date equipment and is very pleased.

Other teachers reported that many of their students are good kids but are "low students" who have experienced little success in school, suffer from low self-confidence, and need a lot of attention and caring. Many McKinley staff believe that vocational education is suited to such students. A district administrator argued compassionately that with the shrinking offerings in vocational education, "the last hope for youngsters to be successful is gone."

The counselors in general and a number of teachers, however, regard ROC courses in a more favorable light (although the teachers had very little firsthand knowledge about ROC). These classes are perceived as being stronger than the vocational courses offered

by the McKinley faculty, more relevant to needs in the job market, and more successful in teaching skills that can be transferred to the job setting. One district administrator was particularly enthusiastic about the ROC's job orientation—including the teaching of details about how students should dress for particular occupations. All counselors emphasized that ROC is a great opportunity for non-college-bound students, both because it provides better vocational training than is offered on-campus at McKinley and because it is free. However, as was true at Washington and Coolidge, the long distance and travel time from McKinley to most ROC classes—even though free bus transportation is provided— coupled with the principal's lack of enthusiasm for vocational education, discourage many students from participating in the ROC program.

Detracking: Part Fiction, Part Frustration

McKinley began to "detrack" its English and social studies classes during the fall 1988 semester. When we began our fieldwork, shortly after the start of that semester, teachers in those subjects found it difficult to evaluate the success of the detracking effort. They were concerned, however, that the classes were detracked with so little preparation. District officials had told them the previous spring that the state had declared tracking "illegal" and that it must end immediately. The staff had no time to plan for their newly configured, heterogeneous classes and were still struggling with how to teach them. No new texts or teaching materials were made available. History teachers, for instance, were told to use the texts they had used previously in their tracked courses. As a result, the teacher who had formerly taught the slow course was still using a text reportedly "written at the seventh grade level," and the teacher who had formerly taught advanced students was continuing to use his more difficult text with the mixed classes.

While there was much talk about "detracking," we learned that teachers' expectations for students in different groups vary considerably. Teachers still distinguish between fast and regular students. The fast students were characterized by one teacher as "interested in working . . . real competitive . . . liking to work." Such perceptions shape the goals teachers have for their students. For example, a teacher of AP English said she wanted her students to develop a thorough understanding of literature, both the content and conceptual framework. The same teacher said that in her regular English classes she concentrated more on spelling and stressed usage and grammar. Her comments suggest that, as in schools with formal tracking systems, McKinley teachers tend to emphasize the higher-level thinking processes in the advanced classes and routine drill and practice for lower-level students.

As at Coolidge and Washington, many McKinley staff expressed ambivalence about tracking. One counselor speculated that the philosophy behind heterogeneous grouping is to encourage all students to rise to higher levels. Others said, "It gives them an idea of what the real world is like." Yet, some also complain that with detracking, "kids are just thrown together . . . they have to swim." On the other hand, teachers in math and science, where highly stratified tracking still exists, feel that the students are as frequently misplaced as not. Although most at McKinley see tracking as problematic, they also view detracking as troublesome.

Guidance and Counseling: Enormous Obstacles

McKinley's counselors serve as personal confidants, academic guides, social workers, and disciplinarians. Additionally, the principal expects each counselor to bear primary responsibility for handling discipline problems that arise with his or her advisees. Counselors at McKinley, like those at our other two schools, view their multiple duties as conflicting. They complained about their responsibility for discipline, not simply because they do not like the role or the punitive style of the principal, but because the principal calls on them to handle students' problems, no matter how petty, at all times of the day. Counselors complain they are pulled away from their guidance and support roles. "Your day is fragmented . . . [we're too often] drawn away to do something that is not pressing."

Several counselors said that the principal's demands and their paperwork responsibilities easily took up 50 percent of their time. They all reported that the paperwork load is staggering—and made more so because they try to protect their actions from future criticism by minutely recording and documenting major counseling decisions as well as one-on-one conversations with the principal. One counselor said she documents all exchanges with teachers, staff, and parents so that if a question arises in the future about a student's placement, there will be concrete evidence to back up her actions.

Counselors at McKinley, more so than their peers at other schools, expressed frustration at being charged with so much responsibility and having so few resources and so little support. The critical issue for this group is their lack of control and authority. At McKinley, "the principal decides, ... decides everything." "This is his school and he will run it." Things are "his way or no way."

CURRICULUM ORIGINS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

In exploring specific factors that have influenced the shape and direction of McKinley's curriculum, one important caveat regarding curricular change at McKinley

should be kept in mind: In the views of many respondents at the district and school level, change occurs more often in name than in fact. The district vocational education assistant said that when a change is mandated, people just think of different names for the same old way of doing things; they continue former practices, fitting their rhetoric to the new orientation.

The Effect of State Reforms: Responding to the Press for Academics

McKinley's curriculum, particularly since its college-oriented principal came on board, has changed in response to increased state graduation requirements and university admissions requirements. "We are guided by [the university system]," the principal told us. He argued that since the majority of McKinley graduates attend state universities,[8] the school has been obliged to alter course offerings accordingly. In the academic curriculum, the effect has been to "detrack" English and social studies and to define all courses in these subjects as college-preparatory. However, many teachers reported that few substantive changes have been made in the scope or rigor of the course material covered. The effect on electives, including vocational education, has been more profound, resulting in a massive reduction in the range of courses offered.

The implementation of state-required proficiency testing during the late 1970s also illustrates our view that curricular change has been more a matter of *form* than of *content*. One district administrator explained that the district, by default, is still using a seventh-grade-level test to assess students' proficiency in basic academic skills. According to this respondent, the district's original intention was to use this test to determine a baseline for passing and failing, and to raise the test level annually as curriculum revisions improved student performance. However, the planned curriculum changes were not enacted, the test was not changed, and the academic achievement of the district's secondary students remains "at a low, low level."

Although the state's model curriculum frameworks in academic subjects are supposedly being implemented at McKinley, teachers report that their influence to date is imperceptible, in part because of lack of support—for course development and for instructional supplies and books. Likewise, the new state vocational education guidelines have had virtually no impact on McKinley's course offerings. The district official in charge of vocational education curriculum said that the state model curriculum was

[8]Our statistics to the contrary were presented at the beginning of this section.

excellent, but that it would require more teachers and more vocational education classes than are currently available in the district.

State and Federal Funding for Vocational Education

Administrators told us that the district's budget limitations and the high rate of teacher absenteeism at McKinley affect the way funds for special purposes—including for vocational education—are used. As a general rule, all discretionary funds are channelled to where the need is the greatest. We were told that Perkins and other monies have covered the salaries of teacher aides in a variety of classes and have helped to support programs for disadvantaged students, limited-English-proficient students, and teen parents. But school and district respondents were reluctant to elaborate further.

Chaos in the District

At the district level, there is no highly placed administrator who serves as a spokesperson for vocational education. The district's Vocational Education Assistant for Special Projects appears to have little authority over what happens at McKinley or the other schools in the district. Consequently, the school has felt little pressure from the district to maintain and develop vocational programs.

In general, the district is in such confusion that district-level curriculum leadership can be characterized best as laissez-faire. Thus, in spite of a district policy of standardizing curriculum across schools, there is considerable flexibility in what schools actually do. Within the limits of its school-based resources, McKinley offers those courses that conform to its academic image. The principal told us that vocational and other elective courses are added or dropped depending on "whether there are teachers who can teach them and attract students to them." As principal, he has the authority to decide that a course should exist, but he claims he is "handicapped by teachers' ability to hold students' interest or understanding."

Seemingly unrelated school problems and the principal's solutions to them can also interfere with students' curriculum opportunities. For example, the district considers the ROC off-campus courses to be a part of the high school offerings. However, the principal has discouraged students from attending ROC, and he withheld information about the program because, he said, of his concern over larger school problems such as preventing truancy and securing the campus from outsiders involved in gang activity. Because he worried that security guards could not distinguish between students legitimately leaving campus (to attend ROC classes) and those who may be headed for

trouble, he sealed off the campus at lunchtime. It is difficult to determine whether this action was motivated primarily by these problems or the principal's desire for students to concentrate on academic coursework. However, district pressure on the principal eventually led to a freer flow of students to and from ROC.

The Future: Overwhelming Barriers to Change

McKinley's principal and assistant principal both described the school's course offerings as fairly rigid. Accommodations to state graduation requirements and university admissions requirements have left the school little choice in what it does and does not offer.

Despite the school's inability to change the curriculum in the face of strong external pressures, the district has established a seemingly collegial and community-oriented process for curriculum reform. Teachers and administrative staff propose ideas for course additions, textbooks, or learning materials to a school committee which forwards its recommendations to a district-level committee. Materials or courses that the district committee supports are then placed on public display at the district offices for community review and comment. Following this public review, the district administrator seeks school board approval.

The district maintains that McKinley is currently reworking its academic courses to conform with the state model framework. The focus is now supposed to be on the math, science, and social studies curriculum. The district asked the school to first help with test construction, since the administrator in charge believes that "anything you test, you prepare for better." Yet we found no evidence that this process is actually occurring. Moreover, the administrator in charge told us that teacher response to the project is "terrible." In her view, to create new curricula, you need to get people involved with the work, but in this district, "they don't feel involved," and poor participation acutely slows curriculum reform.

This administrator also explained that in order to implement major curriculum changes to meet the increased state graduation requirements, McKinley needs to build a cadre of instructors with backgrounds and teaching skills different from those of the current majority of mature, tenured teachers. The district offers a variety of workshops in instructional practice to address this need, and some faculty have diversified their certification. Many of those who have diversified are physical education and social studies teachers who are expected to fill shortages in math and science.

One administrator told us that although the principal says he strongly supports vocational education, he is in fact the school's greatest obstacle to vocational curriculum reform. This administrator believes that the principal's low regard for vocational programs has kept such programs from flourishing at the school and that the school does not always respond to those state initiatives related to vocational education.

The principal, however, blames the teachers for the lack of school improvement. He claims that McKinley teachers resist training, have "no order in the classroom," and do not try to improve their methods because of parental apathy and their secure union contract. High teacher absenteeism and heavy use of substitute staff does appear to impede collegial curriculum reform. Furthermore, one teacher, speaking for many others, said that she would like to take a more active role in the department and the district, but that she fears losing her anonymity and opening herself to criticism and humiliation by the principal. Administrators and counselors complain that because of the school's chaotic atmosphere and the fact that they are always "on call" to the principal, they are perpetually "behind" in their work.

WHO GETS WHAT AND WHY AT McKINLEY: COUNSELING AND CURRICULUM PATTERNS

McKinley High School serves a disparate and largely disadvantaged minority student population. It is unquestionably dealing with much tougher educational problems than is either Coolidge or Washington. Yet, quite apart from the serious educational deficiencies and social problems of many of McKinley's students, the school's principal and the polarized and increasingly demoralized atmosphere he has created have had a markedly negative effect on the school's vocational and academic curriculum. Daily life at McKinley is chaotic and unpleasant, the existing curriculum is weak, and there is a widespread belief among the teachers and administrative staff that significant improvement in these areas is beyond their reach.

The pervasive attitude among the staff regarding student opportunities for academic improvement illustrates their general passivity and apathy. Nearly all staff indicated that students are responsible for initiating efforts to improve their standing at the school—including their course placements. Some staff said that the school does not spend time reevaluating students once they are placed. Some believe that the school should be more aggressive in helping students move into "higher-level" courses. One teacher who works with the widest possible range of students confirmed that a failing student at McKinley must seek help on his or her own to become successful. At the same

time, this teacher expressed the belief that low-ability students need to be monitored throughout their high school years and encouraged to move from general to college-preparatory courses, but admitted this commitment is not present at McKinley.

McKinley's academic and vocational curriculum is also weak. Despite heavy emphasis on college preparation, the college-preparatory program does not appear to be rigorous. Many respondents reported that the advanced courses are watered down, and that most of the "detracked" English and social studies classes that meet college entrance requirements are, in fact, low-level courses. These reports and students' performance on tests suggest that the school's academic emphasis is more form than substance.

For students not planning to attend college, McKinley's vocational educational offerings provide a poor alternative. Students must depend on their counselors to provide information and direction toward vocational classes and programs.

As was true at our other schools, some McKinley staff—particularly the vocational teachers—admitted that vocational education is often used as a place to put students with discipline problems and as a schedule filler for low-achieving students. These teachers complained that the counselors schedule students for vocational education "when they don't know where to put someone." "And," one added, "we spend the whole year trying to get them out." Teachers end up "dealing with them, and not with the students who really should be there." "It's rough. The dumps get overcrowded . . . it always happens [in classes scheduled] at the end of the day." Many vocational teachers feel that this practice has led to a further decline in the status of these courses.

At first glance, McKinley's articulated mission and goals create a strong impression of a school tackling head-on the difficult and important challenge of preparing low-income minority students for college. The curriculum appears to be highly academic and the counseling system seems designed to create and support a college-oriented student body. However, a closer look suggests that these appearances are misleading—that the press toward academics is more form than substance, and efforts to create an academic image have wrought havoc with efforts to provide high-quality vocationally oriented programs. In short, while its intentions may be good, McKinley seems to have created a curriculum and school environment that serves no group of students well.

V. THE DILEMMA OF SECONDARY VOCATIONAL EDUCATION: PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS FROM THREE SCHOOLS

The national policy debate on vocational education focuses on the changing nature of work and on the needs of the future workforce. Existing secondary vocational education programs have had difficulty demonstrating that they increase students' access to or successful participation in the labor market. And serious questions have been raised about how to reform those high school vocational programs in ways that address the technical and political problems of preparing the future workforce.

Our study of curriculum decisionmaking in vocational education is premised on the belief that meaningful reform can occur only if educational policymakers have a better understanding of how high schools work and, in particular, how those who run them think about curriculum and student placement. In the case studies reported here, we looked at the organization, administration, and traditions of each school, the current academic and vocational curriculum, the processes by which students are placed in courses, and the origins and likely future directions of academic and vocational programs.

Our understanding of these issues will be sharpened by analysis of the transcripts we collected from seniors in the class of 1988 at each school. Combined with our case-study findings, these data should indicate how students actually move through the academic and vocational curricula at each school.

In this section, we shall step back from the daily life at Coolidge, Washington, and McKinley High Schools to make some preliminary observations about the status of vocational educational at these three schools, the curriculum decisionmaking process, and school and district constraints on vocational offerings. These observations, in turn, should help to identify some of the obstacles that reformers face in improving secondary vocational education.

THREE HIGH SCHOOLS: OVERRIDING SIMILARITIES

As we noted at the outset of this report, we selected high schools that have important similarities as well as differences. Each has a student body of approximately the same size, each has a four-year grade span, and all are located within the same labor market; they are also subject to the same state curriculum policies. Yet the student bodies of the three schools differ in ethnic and racial mix as well as economic status, and each school is part of a different local school district.

Because of these differences, we also expected to find differences in the type and range of vocational programs available, the number of and expectations for the students who take vocational courses, and staff perceptions of the role and quality of those courses. As our research progressed, we saw other striking differences among these schools, in their organization and style of management, the morale of faculty and staff, and local traditions or history—all factors that have shaped the range of course offerings and staff perceptions of the curriculum.

Despite these differences, however, we were struck most by the many overriding similarities among the schools: First, because of the large numbers of students assigned to counselors, the activism of parents of college-bound students, and the severe personal and academic problems that many students face, the guidance and placement structure at all three schools seems to serve least well those untroubled students who are not college-bound. Second, while each of the schools offers a variety of vocational courses, none has—or purports to have—a cohesive, comprehensive vocational "program." In general, vocational education commands very little attention in these schools. Third, at all three schools, we encountered negative perceptions of the role and quality of existing vocational courses, of the faculty who teach those courses, and of the students who take them. These negative perceptions, combined with the absence of an aggressive counseling system for non-college-bound students, have acted synergistically to drain the little remaining vitality and cohesion from existing vocational offerings.

"Cracks" in the Guidance and Placement Process

Counselors at each school told us that they are best able to serve the needs of high-achieving college-bound students and those with the most severe behavioral and academic problems. With cohort assignments that range from a low of 350 students (assigned to the "pullout" counselor at Coolidge) to a high of 700 students (assigned to the freshman counselor at McKinley), it is no surprise that overburdened counselors respond primarily to those with the most severe problems or to those with whom the counseling relationship promises to be most rewarding. The assignment system used at Coolidge and McKinley, moreover, reinforces the tendency of counselors to concentrate on the brightest or the most troubled students. The counselor at Coolidge who "pulls out" the high achievers and those with English-language deficiencies during the tenth grade and follows them through twelfth grade has a significantly smaller cohort assignment than do the others. At McKinley, one counselor focuses exclusively on helping students gain entrance to college.

Counselors who are overwhelmed with the needs of students at the academic and behavioral extremes have little time left to seek out those whose needs are less evident. In fact, counselors at each of the schools we visited candidly admitted that a large group of students—those who are passive, those who are undecided about their post-graduation plans, and those with poor-to-average academic skills—can and do "fall through the cracks" of the guidance structure. The burden falls largely on the students themselves to come forward—to request a change in their track placement, to seek out career information, or to ask for advice. Yet these are precisely the students who are least likely to do so. These are also less likely to gain admission to college and are unlikely to have formulated specific post-graduation occupational plans or acquired the requisite skills to enter the workforce.

The nature of this relationship between students and counselors characterizes the placement and career guidance process at each of our schools. We found little evidence that students at any of our schools move out of the academic tracks or ability groups into which they were placed in the ninth grade. Explanations for the lack of such movement vary. Some faculty and staff believe that they are skilled in placing students appropriately. More frequently, we heard that students choose courses appropriate to their abilities and interests, or that they are "scared" of moving to a higher track or are "not motivated" to do more advanced work. The constraints under which counselors and teachers must operate reinforce the lack of movement. The general precept at each school seems to be that if there is no pressure from the students themselves or their parents, there is little need to reevaluate a student's academic placement or overall curriculum plan.

Career guidance, for the most part, is a similarly passive process at the three schools. Students at Washington and Coolidge have access to career centers on campus which maintain information on a variety of specific occupations (including the requisite entry-level education and skills) and sponsor speakers who represent different careers. All students tour these facilities when they enter the school; they are free to return at any time during their high school careers. Few of the students with whom we spoke reported using the services of these career centers. A similar center at McKinley was recently closed. At each of our schools, tenth grade students complete a survey to assess their career interests and must talk with their counselors individually about their post-graduate plans. Only at Coolidge, however, did we find evidence that counselors attempt to

integrate those discussions into curriculum planning.[1] Career and occupational guidance for students at each of our schools is generally viewed by counselors and staff as being somewhat secondary to the school's primary mission of educating.

Absence of a Coherent Vocational "Program"

The instructional patterns we observed at each school mirrored their guidance and placement patterns: College-level instruction and basic-skills remediation, rather than vocational education, are the dominant concerns. Increasing academic graduation requirements and pressure to meet university admissions requirements have squeezed many of the elective slots out of student schedules, slots that could have been filled with vocational courses. This reduced flexibility has drastically cut vocational enrollments. The drop in enrollments at Coolidge and Washington, and a strengthened academic emphasis at McKinley, combined with declines in funding at all three schools, have, in turn, decimated vocational offerings. As a result, none of the schools has a cohesive, sequenced vocational curriculum or "program." Instead, each school has made somewhat different decisions about which courses to cut.

The mix of vocational courses that remains at each school is less a function of a deliberate strategy than of several, often contradictory influences, including a desire to retain the "traditional" vocational and practical arts (e.g., sewing, cooking, wood shop, auto shop, and metal shop); the relative seniority of individual vocational teachers; the ability of particular courses to attract students; the school and district's ability to raise supplemental funds for vocational courses; and prevailing perceptions of the "needs" of students at each school. So, for example, while the principal at Coolidge believes that the skills taught and the technology used in the school's auto shop courses are outmoded, these courses remain because they are still very popular; teenagers, he says, like to tinker with cars. At Washington, a district "tradition" of offering wood shop has meant that this class has remained even though declines in school enrollment and funding have resulted in the elimination of metal shop, machine shop, graphic arts, and many of the advanced courses in the remaining fields. At Coolidge, a growing belief that all students should learn certain computer-based skills, combined with the ability of individuals in the district to raise supplemental funds, led to creation of the school's technology center. This

[1]Each student's post-graduation plans (i.e., college, vocational school, military service, or work) and occupational objective are listed on the programming cards that counselors retain and use in helping students plan their schedules each year.

development at Coolidge appeared to be the only link between decisions about course offerings and the future needs of the workforce.

Poor Teachers, Poor Equipment, Poor Students, Poor Courses

The hodgepodge of vocational courses that remains at each campus is of mixed quality. Many of the non-vocational teachers at Washington were enthusiastic about the quality of that school's vocational teachers and curriculum. The McKinley principal had high praise for the school's business teacher, saying that she prepares her students well to apply for secretarial jobs by testing them with government civil service tests. Coolidge's technology teacher (also the district technology adviser) enthusiastically believes that technological skills can be integrated into every aspect of the school's curriculum. To interest students in acquiring those skills, he is directing a group of students who are producing a weekly closed-circuit television show; he has developed a computer mail package which he uses to link Coolidge students with other high school students in the United States and abroad; and he began a ham radio and electronics class as well as overseeing the school's new technology center.

Yet many of the vocational offerings at these schools are staffed by poor or unmotivated teachers, using outmoded equipment and teaching skills that are no longer used in business or industry. Coolidge's principal complained that students in his school's auto shop are still being taught to adjust carburetors, even though most cars now have fuel injection. McKinley's principal said he believes that shorthand is an important and salable skill. He wants to offer that course but claims he cannot find "one person who can [teach] shorthand competently."

If, as several of our respondents said, some vocational courses are regarded as "dumping grounds," the students "dumped" into them are often held in similarly low regard by faculty and staff. Teachers and administrators at each school told us that students who take vocational courses are "stigmatized." Some respondents were quite blunt in their characterizations of students who take vocational courses. Coolidge's principal characterized these students as "the dregs of the school." The Washington auto shop teacher told us that "whatever driftwood is around campus" is put into his classes.

Constraints imposed at each school by the student placement process, the dominance of the academic program, and the needs of the master schedule reinforce negative perceptions of the vocational courses and the students in them. Several vocational teachers told us that many students "end up" in their courses because counselors have nowhere else to put them. Students who become disruptive or

dysfunctional in academic classes are transferred into vocational classes. A Washington teacher told us, "Vocational education is the class where students go when no other electives are available, or when they can't do the work in the other available electives. The mentality is, send those problem kids to the back of the school." Teachers at McKinley echoed these sentiments; one told us, "The dumps get overcrowded." The major motivation behind this practice seems to be to preserve academic classes from disruption rather than to have any positive effect on the disruptive students. But most vocational teachers, having precariously low class enrollments and fearing that their positions could be eliminated, feel that they have little room to complain about this practice. In addition, many vocational teachers are reluctant to fail students who regularly attend class. Thus, it is hardly surprising that a cyclical pattern of low teacher expectations, low student achievement, and pervasive demoralization has taken hold.

TOWARD A NEW APPROACH TO VOCATIONAL REFORM

As we noted in the Introduction, the findings presented in this report are preliminary. Further research, particularly the analysis of student transcripts, should answer many remaining questions about the curriculum and placement process at these schools and should also refine and validate the observations we have outlined here. Nevertheless, the present analysis of Coolidge, Washington and McKinley High Schools sheds some light on the debate over the future of secondary vocational education.

First, we discovered that this debate is not taking place at McKinley, Washington, or Coolidge in a recognizable form. We heard very little about the needs of the future workforce or about defining the most constructive mix of academic and vocational courses to meet future technological needs. Schools need a definite educational strategy for capable non-college bound youth short of watered-down academic courses and a piecemeal vocational program. But instead, the prevailing negative attitudes we observed toward vocational courses and the students who take those courses have recast or in essence individualized the terms of debate over the most appropriate mix for non-college-bound students: Because of the major demographic changes that have occurred in each school's student body, staff comment only about what their students "need" and what is "appropriate" for their students.

Yet, the lack of any discussion of the optimum mix of academic and vocational courses, the absence of a deliberate educational strategy for students with a range of academic abilities and aspirations, and the fact that faculty and staff hold such consistently negative perceptions of existing vocational courses, teachers, and students

helps to sort out some of the most commonly discussed configurations for incorporating vocational skills into the high school curriculum. Vocational and practical arts instruction has historically been regarded as an integral component of the "comprehensive" high school curriculum. Some of the most popular reform recommendations—e.g., those that argue for infusing traditional vocational programs with instruction in basic skills—are consistent with this view of the comprehensive high school.

However, increasing academic course requirements and declining funding have emasculated what was once a much richer and more diverse vocational program. What remains is a small number of courses held in low regard by many teachers and administrators. In the words of one Coolidge vocational teacher, "voc ed is 90 percent dead here." The recent history of vocational instruction at all three schools strongly suggests that if it remains within the context of the comprehensive high school curriculum, vocational education will continue to wither away. These conditions also make it unlikely that reforming the content of current vocational offerings would help prepare students for productive work.

The regional occupational programs (ROP) to which each of our case study schools are attached constitute an alternative form of vocational education, supplementing the comprehensive high school curricula. These programs generally offer courses that teach up-to-date skills on the latest equipment, with instructors who are well-connected to the occupations they teach. Consequently, these centers have been hailed by some as an appropriate way to increase the efficacy of vocational education. Our respondents had uniformly positive perceptions of ROP classes: Instructors were well-informed and prepared, and students acquired training in up-to-date technological skills that allowed them to obtain entry-level jobs. Yet ROP courses are often conducted off-campus, and many classes are longer than those conducted on-campus and are held either after school or in the evening. Moreover, students are permitted to apply only a limited number of ROP credits toward high school graduation. As a result, to take advantage of these courses, students must make a commitment to their education above and beyond what they are already making. In view of mounting academic requirements for graduation, this kind of commitment may be unrealistic for many students.

Some have argued that a separate vocational high school for non-college-bound students may be a more appropriate alternative than trying to revitalize the comprehensive curriculum. Yet, as we saw, teachers and administrators readily sort students in terms of abilities, curriculum "needs," and post-graduation aspirations by their

racial and ethnic background. We repeatedly heard staff express low expectations for minority students. We saw how those expectations were often translated into low-ability-group placements for these students. And we also noted the low esteem in which many administrators held vocational courses, which they nonetheless believe are often "appropriate" for the "needs" of these non-college-bound, minority students. This raises the very real possibility that separate vocational high schools would be perceived as being largely for non-white, non-college-bound students. And their establishment would bring into stark contrast issues of educational equity that are at present only tacitly acknowledged in comprehensive high schools.

The distressing findings about vocational education at our three schools suggest that those who advocate the abolition of vocational education at the secondary level may be well on their way to seeing that goal attained. At least in states where academic requirements for high school graduation have been increased, vocational programs are being squeezed out of the curriculum—by default, if not by design.[2] However, given the differentiation of the academic curriculum in most comprehensive high schools, such reforms promise little improvement in the education and training of many students who would otherwise be in vocational courses. These students are most often found in low-level, remedial academic courses where the content is often impoverished and the teaching uninspired (McKnight et al., 1987; Oakes, 1985). Adding more of this "academic" curriculum to students' high school experiences shows little promise as a way of enhancing workforce preparation or improving more general educational outcomes.

All this suggests that a more radical approach to high school reform is worth further investigation—namely, a more fundamental reconstruction of the high school curriculum, so that the distinction between "academic" and "vocational" subjects is blurred. Rather than eliminating secondary vocational courses or incorporating into them basic-skills instruction, academic course content might be fused with vocational education's hands-on approach to solving real life problems. Such hybrid courses might turn out to be more appropriate for *most* students, not only those now in vocational education. Two lines of work support this possibility: (1) cognitive psychologists are building a body of knowledge that suggests that students are more likely to really understand academic concepts when they are presented in the context of life situations and problems (e.g., Resnick, 1988; Schoenfeld, 1985); and (2) other researchers are

[2]A recent study published by the National Center for Policy Research in Education found similar results in six quite diverse states (Clune, 1989).

suggesting that the generic skills that might be acquired in such courses—diagnosing and solving problems and applying knowledge from one context to a novel situation, for example—are those most likely to be needed by workers in the future (Office of Technology Assessment, 1988).

Our case study schools provided us with no evidence that such reforms would be easily accepted or implemented. However, given the current pressures toward academics and the negative attitudes about existing vocational courses (and the students in them), such reforms may actually face fewer obstacles than the more familiar proposals we discussed earlier. Our experiences in our three high schools suggest that this more radical alternative at least deserves serious consideration in the debate about whether and how to reform secondary school vocational education.

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